

**Channel 4 and British Film: An Assessment of  
Industrial and Cultural Impact, 1982-1998**

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## **Abstract**

This thesis is an historical investigation of Channel 4's influence on the British film industry and on British film culture between 1982 and 1998. Combining archival research with interview testimony and secondary literature, this thesis presents the history of a broadcaster's involvement in British film production, while also examining the cultural and industrial impact of this involvement over time. This study of the interdependence of film and television will aim to bring together aspects of what have hitherto been separate disciplinary fields, and as such will make an important contribution to film and television studies.

In order to better understand this interdependence, this thesis will offer some original ideas about the relationship between film and television, examining the ways in which Channel 4's funding methods led to new production practices. Aside from the important part the Channel played in funding (predominantly low-budget) films during periods when the industry was in decline and film finance was scarce, this partnership had profound effects on British cinema in the 1980s and 1990s. In exploring these effects, this thesis will look at the ways in which the film funding practices of the Channel changed the landscape of the film industry, offered opportunities to emerging new talent, altered perceptions of British film culture at home and abroad, fostered innovative aesthetic practices and brought new images of Britain to cinema and television screens.

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## **Declaration**

Whilst registered as a candidate for the above degree, I have not been registered for any other research award. The results and conclusions embodied in this thesis are the work of the named candidate and have not been submitted for any other academic award.

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## **Abbreviations**

BBC	British Broadcasting Corporation
BFI	British Film Institute
BSF	British Screen Finance
BSAC	British Screen Advisory Council
BUFVC	British Universities Film and Video Council
C4	Channel 4
CEA	Cinema Exhibitor's Association
FFI	Film Four International
NFFC	National Film Finance Corporation
UKFC	UK Film Council.

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## Dissemination

### Publications

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### Presentations

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‘Productive Relationships: Film on Four and the New Creative Culture of the 1990s’, Channel 4 and British Film Culture Conference at BFI Southbank, London (November 2012).

‘From Cannes to Berlin: Examining the importance of film festivals in promoting Channel 4 films in Europe’, NECS (European Network for Cinema and Media Studies) Conference at the New University of Lisbon (June 2012).

‘Film on Four: policy, diversity and shifting identities’, Postgraduate Research Student Conference, University of Portsmouth (May 2012).

‘Film on Four: changing policies, shifting identities’, talk given at the Southern Broadcasting History Group Seminar Series held at the University of Portsmouth (April 2012).

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“‘A sense of time and place’: examining the regional aesthetic in the work of Channel 4’s first Commissioning Editor for Fiction, David Rose’, The Politics of Television Space, conference at the University of Leicester (April 2011).

## Introduction

*The policy from the outset was to commission or set the cornerstone for some 20 feature length films per year ... Films made on comparatively modest budgets, taking strength from a sense of the particular, a sense of time and place – written and directed by established filmmakers and introducing new writing and directing talent. Films of imagination and originality.*<sup>1</sup>

David Rose, Channel 4 Senior Commissioning Editor for Fiction, 1981-1990.

## Overview

It was Channel 4's first Chief Executive, Jeremy Isaacs, who made film financing a priority within the original remit of the 1980 Broadcasting Act under which the Channel was established. As he prepared to take up his position, Isaacs and the Channel's Commissioning Editor for Fiction, David Rose, defined their idea for a new broadcasting strand called 'Film on Four'. The films scheduled in this slot would be funded (or co-funded) by the Channel, which would, in essence, be working with the film industry and co-producing British films on a consistent basis; a move completely unprecedented in the history of British film and television. The original aim was to commission around twenty low-budget films each year from independent producers, some of which would be fully funded, but most of which (for financial reasons) would be co-productions. Film on Four started with this broad template, which soon diversified to include a number of international co-productions as well as partnerships with other UK broadcasters. In the early days of the Channel theatrical release was an ambition for only a few select productions, but this soon became more common throughout the 1980s (increasing considerably in the 1990s).

'Film on Four' was the name given to the films commissioned by Channel 4 between 1982 and 1998. Film on Four operated within the Fiction (later Drama)

department of the Channel, first under the aegis of David Rose (between 1982 and 1990) and then under David Aukin (between 1990 and 1998). In 1998 the Channel's film production and distribution activities, which had diversified considerably throughout the 1990s, were merged into a standalone company - FilmFour Ltd - under the leadership of Paul Webster. Whereas Film on Four had employed a cultural policy and enjoyed economic security from the Channel, FilmFour was a largely commercial enterprise which was far more focused on profits and securing international co-production deals. Following the collapse of this venture in 2002, film sponsorship activities were subsumed within the Channel once more, under the title of 'Film4'. Although part three of this thesis will briefly touch upon Film4 in its contemporary guise (in order to discuss marketing, identity, and issues of cultural perception) this thesis will focus mainly on the time period of 1982-1998 in order to offer a more comprehensive study. The identity and working practices of each of these enterprises varied considerably, and there is simply not enough space to dedicate to a detailed study of each of these eras in the Channel's history.

This thesis will be largely historical in scope, utilising scholarly literature, archival sources and interviews with key industry figures in order to examine Channel 4's role as both a producer and distributor of film. Part One will examine the development of Channel 4's policy towards film and the Channel's contribution to the production of film culture in the UK through its creation of a distinctive identity (or identities) for British film. Key questions to consider will be: how far was there a tension between cultural and commercial interests in the case of Film on Four and the Channel in general? How did those responsible for Film on Four, particularly in the more competitive broadcasting environment of the 1990s,

negotiate those interests? How far did the Channel's film policy and commissioning practices lead to new aesthetic trends in British cinema?

Part Two will look at the Channel's role as a producer (or co-financier) of film, and will examine the Channel's involvement in independent production and its role as a supporter of new creative talent. This section will build upon ideas discussed in Part One, and will argue that a combination of the commissioning structures and editorial autonomy at the Channel gave rise to new working practices and production cultures within the British film and television industries. Given that a large percentage of British films produced every year since 1982 were made with Channel 4 funding, how far did working practices in the film industry change as a result? Did the partnership between television and film give rise to new production practices in the British film industry?

In Part Three, discussion will turn to ideas about identity and perception. The influence of a broadcaster on the British film industry and on film production cultures is arguably easier to define historically than through more ambiguous notions about cultural 'impact' and 'value'. How do we define the 'value' of film? How do we define what has been culturally relevant? Part Three will look at these issues, particularly in relation to how Channel 4's importance to British film culture is viewed at home and abroad. The focus here will also be on industrial practices however, with a historical analysis of one of the Channel's most important achievements; the formation of transnational exchanges with Europe and the US for co-production and international distribution.

The originality of this thesis resides in two main areas. Firstly, this thesis will advance the historiography of British film and television by setting out the

previously undocumented history of a broadcaster which, since 1982, has become one of Britain's leading film producers. But this is not a question merely of filling historical gaps; the interdependence of film and television requires a fresh approach to study, and this thesis brings together aspects of what have hitherto been separate disciplinary fields. Secondly, this thesis advances conceptual ideas about how we can understand the areas of convergence and divergence between the British film and television industries, and will examine how Channel 4's methods of film financing led to the growth of new production practices. This is a subject which has been studied elsewhere, but largely in the US context. Part of the originality of this approach lies in assessing the importance of a television broadcaster as a film producer; thus, this thesis will address comprehensively industrial and cultural influence over time. By contextualising archival research with interview material, this thesis will seek to explore the relationship between broadcasters and film producers, and map creative practices across the sector. As such, it is hoped that it will form an important addition to the convergent fields of film and television studies.

Finally, it should be recognised that this thesis has been undertaken as part of a four-year Arts and Humanities Research Council-funded project titled 'Channel 4 and British Film Culture', based at the University of Portsmouth. The aim of the project has been to assess the impact of Channel 4 on British film in terms of its sponsorship practices, its coverage of and engagement with film culture (through magazine programmes and innovative scheduling of avant-garde seasons) and its legacy as a film distributor and provider of digital channels, and this thesis has been completed within the broader scope of this project.

## **Background and debates**

The origins of Channel 4 have been extremely well-documented elsewhere, by Sylvia Harvey, Paul Bonner and Leslie Ashton, John Ellis and Andrew Crissel, among others. Such background and key debates will briefly be summarised here, but not reprised in detail. The birth of Channel 4 was the outcome of almost two decades of complex debates and clashes of ideology which culminated in the 1977 Annan Report on the Future of Broadcasting. After the Pilkington Committee allocated the third channel to the BBC in 1962, there was an assumption that it would later allocate a fourth, and that this would go to ITV, and would essentially become ITV2. However, the Labour government under Prime Minister Harold Wilson deferred the allocation of the fourth channel throughout the 1960s due to other commitments. In 1970, partly fuelled by a suspicion of commercial broadcasting, the Labour government decided that a committee of enquiry should be formed to debate the future of broadcasting, and headed by Lord Annan. The committee was subsequently deferred by the incoming Conservative government but reconvened after Labour was re-elected in 1974, by which time feelings towards the fourth channel had changed.<sup>2</sup>

Before 1982 British broadcasting was dominated by the BBC and ITV, though intellectual pressure for a fourth channel had been building from the late 1960s. For years programme makers had struggled to find an outlet for their ideas - ideas which had previously been ignored by the duopoly in favour of appealing to a wide 'family' audience. Various pressure groups aimed at getting public control of broadcasting production.<sup>3</sup> It was Anthony Smith, Director of the British Film Institute (1979-1988) and a key player in the campaign for the fourth channel, who suggested the idea of the 'publishing house', where the new channel would not make programmes but would instead commission them from independent producers.

Groups such as the Association of Independent Producers (AIP) and The Channel 4 Group campaigned for the rights and interests of independent producers regarding the fourth channel. Whilst the ideal for producers was for the new channel to be run under the auspices of an Open Broadcasting Authority (OBA), this ran into financial and ideological obstacles. These groups lobbied successfully to keep the new channel from becoming ITV2. It would be regulated by the IBA and funded initially by an ITV levy in return for advertising revenue. Most importantly, it would provide an outlet for independent producers by committing to obtaining half its programming from sources other than the ITV companies. These aspirations toward diversity had been summed up succinctly in the Annan report:

Our society's culture is now multi-racial and pluralist: that is to say, people adhere to different views of the nature and purpose of life and expect their own view to be expressed in some form or other. The structure of broadcasting should reflect this variety.<sup>4</sup>

The report recommended the creation of a fourth channel that would be 'experimental in form and content', and indeed the concept of 'innovation' was subsequently written into the 1980 Broadcasting Act that inaugurated Channel 4. Similarly enshrined in its original remit was the idea that the Channel would function as a mouthpiece for those in society whose experiences had previously been marginalised by the BBC and ITV.

Although the idea of the new fourth channel directly financing film production wasn't directly addressed in the Annan Report, it was a passion of the Channel's first Chief Executive, Jeremy Isaacs. He introduced the idea in a speech delivered at the Edinburgh Television Festival in 1979 (which was widely seen as his unofficial application for the post), in which he stated his intention to 'make, or help make, films of feature length for television here, and for the cinema abroad.'<sup>5</sup>



Channel 4's contribution as a film sponsor should be seen in the light of debates surrounding the relationship between cinema and television in the 1970s. Feature films had provided broadcasters with hours of cheap programming at a time when the film industry was in decline. Filmmakers argued that broadcasters should give something back, and that some measure of support should be directed from broadcasters to the film industry.<sup>6</sup>

Elsewhere in Europe, film and television already had a symbiotic relationship. Indeed, according to David Rose, West German broadcasting came to represent the real model for Film on Four policy.<sup>7</sup> Though the historical parallels and differences are undoubtedly complex, it is interesting to note that, in its early years, Film on Four dealt with some of the same critical objections which characterised the co-dependence of film and television in West Germany. According to Martin Blaney, prejudiced accounts of the situation abounded, with many critics accusing television of being the source of the German film industry's ills, while the press at the time had a tendency to represent the relationship between film and television using analogies of squabbling siblings with television characterised as the 'upstart younger brother'.<sup>8</sup> These tensions will be explored further in Chapter 2 of this thesis.

Of the fifteen to twenty films financed or co-financed by the Channel each year, some were to be given theatrical releases before television transmission, and some were made directly for television. Pragmatically, theatrical release was not considered when Isaacs made his speech at the Edinburgh Festival in 1979, which was due partly to the Cinema Exhibitors Association rule that films could only be shown on television three years after first-run exhibition, and partly to the fact that union agreements meant that television films were simply cheaper to produce. In 1986, the CEA introduced measures to exclude films costing under £1.25m, an

exclusion which would be automatic providing details of the films were sent to the Association in advance of television broadcast. In 1988, this exclusion barrier was raised to £4m following a successful campaign led by the Channel's Managing Director Justin Dukes. This rapid acquiescence on the part of the CEA was arguably indicative of the culture shift brought about by the Channel in its first six years of operation.

Within a few years the Channel had achieved theatrical and critical successes with productions like Stephen Frears' 1985 film *My Beautiful Laundrette* and Chris Bernard's *Letter to Brezhnev*, released in the same year. It had also entered into high profile international co-productions with films like Wim Wenders' *Paris Texas* (1984). At the Cannes film festival in 1987, Channel 4 gained public recognition of its successful film funding practices when David Rose was awarded the prestigious Rossellini Award for Services to Cinema. The award signified a coming-of-age moment in the history of Film on Four, bringing with it international recognition of the Channel's commitment to British film culture during bleak years for the domestic industry, and its increasing involvement in European co-productions.

In 1990, David Aukin took over from Rose as Head of Drama at a time when Channel 4 was moving into a more commercial environment under new Chief Executive Michael Grade, who successfully resisted Conservative Government pressure towards privatisation. Nonetheless, in 1993 the Channel was to begin selling its own advertising, and was also facing a more competitive broadcasting market, post-deregulation, with the expansion of cable and satellite channels. This meant that the Channel had to adhere to its remit to be innovative and original and yet still attract advertisers. In the face of increased commercialism Aukin arguably diversified the output of Film on Four, funding more populist films and targeting

younger audiences while still supporting the types of low-budget British features that had long been the staple of the Channel's film output. Chapters 1 and 2 of this thesis will look at the ways in which Film on Four's cultural remit changed in these years, partly as a reaction to the shifting broadcasting landscape, the wider aims of Channel 4, and Aukin's own commissioning strategies.

Channel 4's film funding practices have been instrumental to the growth of the British film industry, and Chapters 3 and 4 are dedicated to examining the Channel's impact on the industry and its relationships with filmmakers. Between 1982 and 1998 Film on Four directly funded over 270 productions. In the mid-1980s the collapse of large production companies such as EMI and Goldcrest and the removal of Rank from British production meant that Channel 4 began to form part of the backbone of a reconfigured industry. The Channel's partnerships with British Screen (which it helped to create and also funded to the tune of £300,000 per annum)<sup>9</sup> and the BFI Production Board also provided some measure of support to an ailing industry, while the Channel also entered into co-productions with larger companies like Merchant-Ivory (e.g. *A Room With A View* [James Ivory, 1985]). The success of the Channel also encouraged other broadcasters to move into film production. ITV companies like LWT followed the Channel's lead, while Zenith was set up as the film production arm of Central television. The BBC also based their model of feature film funding on the Channel's example in order to serve its new Screen 1 and Screen 2 strands in 1987.

Channel 4 has also raised the profile of British film abroad, through its involvement on the festival circuit and relationships with North American independent companies. From the mid-1980s the Channel became increasingly involved in European co-productions, while throughout the 1990s the Channel

enjoyed a longstanding relationship with Miramax (who achieved breakout success in North America with Neil Jordan's *The Crying Game* in 1992) and Polygram Filmed Entertainment (responsible for the UK and European distribution of *Trainspotting* [Danny Boyle, 1996] and *Four Weddings and a Funeral* [Mike Newell, 1994]). Though this thesis is largely concerned with British cinema, some space does need to be given to considering the ways in which the Channel has utilized the European festival circuit as an exhibition outlet for low-budget independent films, particularly as business festivals like Cannes have been instrumental in facilitating production deals in light of the stranglehold of American distribution on the European film industries. Chapter 5 is concerned with international co-production and distribution, but also with issues of cultural perception, in terms of the critical reception of Films on Four in Europe and North America as well as in the UK. The cultural impact of Channel 4 films has been significant, at home and abroad, but the concepts of the 'impact' and 'cultural value' of film are tricky to define, and perhaps even harder to measure – indeed, an entire thesis could be dedicated to this subject alone. Chapter 6, therefore, will look at *perceived* cultural impact; namely, how Films on Four have been viewed and canonised by the press, by cultural institutions and by Channel 4 itself, noting which titles have been deemed culturally relevant, and which have (for financial reasons, lack of distribution or plain neglect) been forgotten. In this way, it will be possible to offer a historical overview of Channel 4 films and their perceived cultural impact on British cinema from 1982, while also recognising the processes of historical revisionism.

However, before any analysis of the Channel's legacy as a film sponsor can take place, critical and academic neglect of this subject must be addressed. Although

the importance of Film on Four to the British film industry and British film culture has been widely acknowledged, this subject has never been systematically studied. Existing studies tend to focus either on institutional accounts of the Channel or on surveys of the British films of the 1980s and 1990s, and neither type of literature fully acknowledges the historical influence of Channel 4 on British film. As noted above, the case of Channel 4 is important to consider because of the convergence the Channel heralded between the film and television industries, a convergence which has had far reaching effects. Channel 4 has offered opportunities for talented filmmakers and provided a staple of finance for the British film industry through harsh economic times.<sup>10</sup> The Channel's film funding practices have also led to changes in film production and exhibition in the UK, significantly reducing the time between cinema exhibition and television broadcast. The effect of Channel 4's film sponsorship has thus been extensive and merits examination.

## **Review of the literature**

The following sections will focus on those secondary texts which have informed the distinct scope, focus and structure of this thesis, as well as noting works which have provided tentative ideas which need to be unpacked in greater detail. Scholarly and published literature can be broadly split into six main areas: specific texts on Channel 4 and Film on Four; general histories and edited collections on British cinema; critical debates on the aesthetic relationship between film and television; production studies of British film studios and filmmakers and work on international critical reception and film canonisation. This section will also take into account the large amount of archival research drawn upon throughout this thesis, assessing the types of material used and discussing issues of archival access (specifically with regard to working in Channel 4's own archives). This thesis has also drawn upon

over 20 interviews with film producers, Channel 4 personnel and Commissioning Editors, and this section will also focus on the ways in which oral testimony has been used in conjunction with primary and secondary material.

Academic accounts of Film on Four can be largely split into three categories: contextual/production histories relating to Film on Four and the inner workings of the Channel, aesthetic debates regarding the consequences of the 'convergence' between film and television, and broad analyses of historical/political/aesthetic trends in Films on Four over time. In terms of specific histories of Film on Four, Maggie's Brown's journalistic overview of Channel 4's history provides a brief account of the Channel's film funding practices in the 1990s. Discussing the Channel's successes in this era, Brown highlights films like *Peter's Friends* (Kenneth Branagh, 1992) *Shallow Grave* (Danny Boyle, 1994), *The Madness of King George* (Nicholas Hytner, 1994), *Brassed Off* (Mark Herman, 1996) and *East is East* (Damien O'Donnell, 1999) offering a more populist history of Film on Four. However, Brown's account is arguably biased in favour of presenting a juicy narrative; for example, she argues that in the early 1990s Chief Executive Michael Grade saw Film on Four as 'vanity publishing' and preferred to focus on TV drama. Based on interviews with Commissioning Editors working in the Drama Department in the 1990s, this information has been shown to be somewhat inaccurate.<sup>11</sup> Dorothy Hobson's *Channel 4: The Early Years and the Jeremy Isaacs Legacy* presents a history of the early years of the Channel and focuses on the internal workings of Channel 4 as an organisation, though has little to say about specific Film on Four productions. Hobson's section on 'programming' does not adequately take into account the wide range of innovative programming shown on the Channel, arguably a firm part of the 'Jeremy Isaacs legacy'.<sup>12</sup> John Hill is one of a few academics to

have published a detailed account of Film on Four policy in the 1980s, with regard to commissioning and investment practices. In his book *British Cinema in the 1980s* he explores the relationship between film and television and sets out the industrial context of filmmaking in Britain in this era.<sup>13</sup> Jeremy Isaacs' own autobiography, *Storm over 4*, as well as Peter Catterall's *The Making of Channel 4* also provide valuable personal perspectives into the day-to-day workings of the Channel in the 1980s.<sup>14</sup>

Martin McCloone focuses on the aesthetic debates surrounding Film on Four in its early years, presenting an overview of the major arguments and discussions relating to the involvement of a television broadcaster in feature film production.<sup>15</sup> The question that lies at the heart of these issues will be examined in more detail in Chapter 2; namely, what constitutes a film for 'television', as opposed to a 'cinema' movie?<sup>16</sup> Aesthetic debates were also the subject of Martin Auty and Nick Roddick's 1985 volume *British Cinema Now?* which sought to examine the long term impact of the involvement of television in the British film industry.<sup>17</sup> John Hill's production history of Film on Four reprises many of these debates, considering the effects of the partnership between film and television, while stressing the 'socio-cultural provenance' and the public-service impetus behind Film on Four.<sup>18</sup> George Brandt notes the role of Film on Four in the decline of the single play, but takes a more pragmatic view of the popular argument that in the 1980s Channel 4 taught British cinema to 'think small'.<sup>19</sup> Aesthetic debates about the convergence of film and television thus constitute a large proportion of academic work on Film on Four, while many historians continue to disagree regarding the importance of Film on Four to British film throughout the 1980s and 1990s.

The most rigorous work dedicated to Film on Four is John Pym's exhaustive catalogue of all Film on Four productions produced between 1982 and 1991. The book offers synopses and analyses of each film as well as detailed production information, including budgets and Channel 4 investment figures. But Pym's book is not simply a filmography. Arranged by year, in each chapter he notes themes and trends which occur throughout particular broadcast seasons. This often relates to the geographical spread of the films (for example, in the 1982-1983 seasons, Pym notes that fifteen films were set in England, five in Scotland and one in Wales, Poland and the Soviet Union respectively) and also historical engagement (in 1984-1985, thirteen films were set in the immediate present, and two in the past). Pym also notes genres and themes, noting, for example, that a 'comic thread ran to some extent through the 1988-89 films'.<sup>20</sup> Pym does not single out specific titles as being more valued or worthy of note, and each film is offered the same level of consideration, from Joseph Despin's little known production *The Disappearance of Harry* (1983) to Stephen Frears' well known 1987 film *Prick up Your Ears*. The point of Pym's book is not to offer value judgements, but to discuss each film on its individual merits. Aside from a list of 'news headlines' at the beginning of each chapter, the book does not contain much in the way of contextual material, but is an important resource in terms of the scarcity of data otherwise available on the Channel 4 films of this era. Pym's survey has also been an enormously useful starting point in compiling a complete database of Channel 4 films from 1982 to 2010 (a sample of which is reproduced as an appendix to this thesis) which draws together detailed information on over 400 Film on Four productions. The data extrapolated from this new resource has considerably informed the structure and scope of this research.



Works which deal with Film on Four specifically, then, tend to do so from the perspective of industrial and film production contexts, aesthetic value judgements regarding the differences between film and television, and attempts to categorise the films in terms of stylistic trends (e.g. as being influenced by single plays, incorporating social realism, or dealing with nostalgic national pasts). This thesis will touch upon all of these areas, encompassing the history of Film on Four, the organisational operation of the Channel, and the contribution of Film on Four to the British film industry in terms of film production, distribution and the creation of new aesthetic trends in British cinema.

Many articles in popular edited collections on British film offer further studies of Films on Four, although these are rarely situated in their production context as being Channel 4-funded films. The Channel has supported many productions which are frequently referenced in terms of their significance to British cinema for a variety of reasons. For example, in his chapter in *British Cinema, Past and Present* Andrew Higson talks about the insufficiency of the term ‘national’ cinema, with the rise of the ‘post-national’ and non consensual film about British life, citing examples such as *My Beautiful Laundrette* (Stephen Frears, 1985) and *Bhaji on the Beach* (Gurinder Chadha, 1993).<sup>21</sup> Indeed, these films, as well as Channel 4-funded productions like Isaac Julien's *Young Soul Rebels* (produced in conjunction with the BFI in 1991) and *East is East* have become seminal texts in work on Asian British cinema. To offer further examples, in Robert Murphy's edited collection *British Cinema in the 1990s*, Moya Luckett looks at national identity in films like *Trainspotting* (Danny Boyle, 1996) while John Hill focuses on the return of class conflict in films like *Brassed Off* (Mark Herman, 1996).<sup>22</sup> Few of these studies take into account the production contexts of the films in question, although the theories and ideas developed in these

studies will to some extent inform the stylistic analyses of Film on Four productions in Chapter 2.

The aesthetic convergence between television and film heralded by Channel 4 was the subject of much controversy at the time, though more recent academic literature has also taken a historical view of these implications. This thesis will not seek to retread old ground, but will briefly reprise and question some of these debates. Taking the issue of aesthetic influences further, interesting ideas have been noted by Paul Giles, Christopher Williams and Samantha Lay regarding stylistic trends in Channel 4 funded films. For example, Giles notes that while a number of Films on Four focus on the domestic (such as Alan Clarke's 1987 film *Rita, Sue and Bob, Too*) others, like Mike Leigh's *Meantime* (1984) take traditional issues of confinement and domesticity and knowingly challenge such ideas.<sup>23</sup> Giles also notes that while many films like those made for David Puttnam's *First Love* (1982-1988) series can be seen as hankering after a nostalgic past, films like *Wish You Were Here* (David Leland, 1987) intelligently engage with and reflect upon notions of a shared national past.<sup>24</sup>

Christopher Williams and Samantha Lay argue that in the 1980s Channel 4 was responsible for the rise of the 'social art film', a style of filmmaking which sought to marry the artistic concerns of European cinema with socially-conscious British realism.<sup>25</sup> This resulted in films like Chris Bernard's *Letter to Brezhnev* (1985), which dealt with political disaffection but also foregrounded the personal and dealt with issues of individual identity and alienation. Hill also notes that in this era a mixture of television funding and government subsidy brought about the beginnings of a move towards more European styles of filmmaking in terms of an increasing reliance on specialised and art house exhibition.<sup>26</sup> Towards the end of the decade, as

American funding grew scarce, European co-productions also became increasingly common, for Film on Four and the industry in general, as did Channel 4's reliance on film festivals as a means of publicising and achieving prestige for its productions. Perhaps the 'social art cinema' as identified by Williams and Lay was symptomatic of the changing structure of the British film industry, partly buoyed by Channel 4. The idea of a correlation between the industrial changes heralded by the arrival of the Channel and the growth of new artistic trends in the British cinema of the 1980s has never been fully explored, and Chapter 2 of this thesis aims in some measure to address these issues.

Part Two of this thesis is largely concerned with effect of Channel 4's film funding practices on the British film industry. With its publishing house commissioning structure, from the early 1980s Channel 4 stimulated the growth of the independent sector, as the long-standing duopoly of the Rank Organization and Thorn-EMI slipped into terminal decline and the adventurers Goldcrest and Cannon went bust, contributing to the rise of a mixed economy wherein other television companies moved into film production. While many of these failed due to market forces and changing commissioning policies, Channel 4's sustained investment led to the establishment of new independents, most notably Working Title, one of the largest film outfits operating in Britain today. Production studies of British cinema in the 1980s and 1990s are invaluable for exploring this relationship and to some extent determining the effects of Channel 4 funding on the British film industry. Duncan Petrie provides a useful analysis of Channel 4 and British film production, exploring the Channel's relationship with independent producers and providing a number of case studies of the leading production companies supported by the Channel.<sup>27</sup>

Edited collections such as Petrie's *New Questions of British Cinema* also explore

independent production and distribution practices in the UK, but with a focus on issues specific to the context of the industry in early 1990s.<sup>28</sup> Higson's *English Heritage, English Cinema* places British films (including many Channel 4 funded films) in their production and distribution contexts, although this account focuses on one specific genre of filmmaking.<sup>29</sup> Alexander Walker also provides a thorough account of the industry from the mid-1980s to 2004. Walker's chronicle draws upon a wide range of press publications and personal correspondence, though his engaging analysis of industrial decline is journalistic rather than academic, at times informed by personal opinion and anecdotal evidence. Michael Darlow, who made his directing debut with the early Film on Four *Accounts* (1982) also provides a historical study of the rise of the independent television sector in Britain, merging personal experience with more rigorous academic research.<sup>30</sup>

The second part of this thesis is also particularly concerned with how working practices in film and television changed as a result of Channel 4's intervention in the film industry. This involves examining, in detail, how films are commissioned, how they are made, and how Channel 4 has built relationships with filmmakers. In what ways do working practices vary between television and film? How are creative decisions made in broadcasting institutions? How does Channel 4 'encourage' new talent? Two bodies of research have been particularly useful in attempting to address these questions: film industry production studies and work on institutions and creativity in the field of business studies. However, methodologies have also been drawn from the fields of sociology, cultural studies and economics. In order to analyse decision making processes within broadcasting institutions and television companies, this thesis has also employed the ideas of James Roberts and Dina Berkeley in investigating the relationship between creativity and commercial

constraint in television.<sup>31</sup> Considering the level of involvement by Rose, Aukin and their teams in film production it is useful to consider the roles of these individuals, particularly as the support offered by Channel 4 was often creative and editorial as well as purely financial. Andrew Spicer's work on the marginalised role of the producer in British cinema has also informed this research.<sup>32</sup> For example, in his recent work on government policy, the state and the 'producer artist' Simon Relph, Spicer acknowledges the importance of the creative producer while using Relph's role as head of British Screen as a case study to examine the ways in which state policy influences British film production.<sup>33</sup> This thesis draws upon such literature to argue that, in the case of Channel 4, the Commissioning Editor can also be seen to have exerted creative influence, on individual productions as well as on the direction and policies of Film on Four in general.

In order to inform this work on institutions, creative personnel and the cultural industries, this thesis will also draw on the disciplines of economics and cultural geography, specifically, the work of Bahar Durmaz and Ivan Turok on Cluster Theory. When studying how relationships are formed in the film and television industries, and how projects come to fruition, Cluster Theory, which privileges consideration of the informal networks of relationships that are established when related companies are concentrated in one area, can be especially useful.<sup>34</sup>

Producers Stephen Woolley and Tim Bevan have often noted in interviews the importance of luck in film production; of being in the right place at the right time, and engaging in chance encounters with the right people. Cluster Theory could offer a way of explaining the interaction of such relationships in conceptual terms, although there is no one comprehensive approach to studying these issues. Indeed,

this thesis draws resources from a range of disciplines and methodologies in order to address these ideas, and to suggest avenues for further research in this area.

Ideas about perception and identity form the basis of the third and final part of this thesis. Film on Four has had a hand in shaping the reputation and legacy of British film, at home and internationally. In light of this, it is important to consider the Channel's relationship with Europe and, to a lesser extent, the USA. Film on Four was modelled using the relationship between film and television in Europe, particularly Germany, as an example. Film on Four's relationship with European cinema was also an important feature of its film funding practices throughout the 1980s - and, to a lesser extent, the 1990s. The exhibition of low-budget British films became highly specialised in the UK due to the historical duopoly of the Rank-EMI circuits and the stranglehold of American distributors, and European film festivals offered opportunities to showcase independent British films (while festival awards offered tokens of prestige which could boost the popularity of certain films in specialised markets). The work of Marike deValke and Thomas Elsaesser on the ways in which film festivals can consecrate films has informed this thesis, particularly Chapter 5, which deals with the ways in which Films on Four have been received internationally. The concept of 'value addition' in the work of deValke and Elsaesser considerably informs this chapter; essentially, the idea that a film which wins a prestigious festival prize is imbued with a certain amount of symbolic capital, elevating its potential in the eyes of specialist art house distributors. Chapter 5 looks at the ways in which the accumulation of symbolic capital has, to some extent, influenced the reception of Films on Four in the UK as well as in international markets.

Part Three also looks at the historical legacy of Film on Four; namely, the ways in which the impact of Channel 4 on the UK film industry has been perceived by critics, press and academics. To this end, Janet Staiger's work on the politics of canonisation has been useful. Staiger considers the ways in which films become part of an established canon in terms of which films are most referenced in academic accounts or generally remembered as being culturally significant. What are the factors which influence which productions are most well-remembered in the public imagination long after release? Joseph Lampel's work on how contemporaneous consecration (box office popularity, awards and industry recognition at the time of release) affects retrospective consecration (films which appear in top films lists, such as the BFI Top 100) can also provide useful ways of addressing this question.

Corporate studies into the British film industry have also considerably informed this research. Reports commissioned by Channel 4, such as the 2008 Olsberg SPI report into the Channel's contribution to the UK film sector, provide details of the Channel's development, production and distribution practices as well as attempting to quantify the Channel's involvement in the industry in terms of economic growth, promoting and supporting new talent and attracting international funding and recognition.<sup>35</sup> In recent years discussions regarding the cultural importance and value of film have risen on the agenda for policy makers and film funding bodies. The now defunct UK Film Council's 2006 report *Stories we Tell Ourselves* attempted to determine which British films have had lasting cultural significance using a sample database of films and a criteria regarding the definition of 'cultural impact' which will be further investigated in Chapter 6.<sup>36</sup> A further report, commissioned by the UK Film Council and the BFI entitled *Opening our Eyes* drew upon qualitative and quantitative research methods in order to examine

the ways in which film can have significant lasting impact on audiences.<sup>37</sup> These studies are particularly useful in that they have represented the first real attempts on the part of industry bodies to define and determine the impact of film in ways which are not purely economic, as well as creating a dialogue between the industry and academics.

### **Archival sources**

It is not possible to address the key aims of this thesis by recourse to secondary literature alone. This research has predominantly been undertaken using two further resources: archives and interviews/oral testimony. Unprecedented access to the Channel 4 archive (a commercial archive not publicly accessible to researchers) and interviews with key personnel have enabled many questions, particularly about the relationship between film and television, to be answered for the first time. This thesis has also drawn on collections held by scholarly archives like the BFI, in particular the Roger Graef papers, which contain policy information relating to the early years of Film on Four, including details of the types of co-production deals offered to producers as well as a significant amount of information regarding the organisational structure of the Channel.

However, much of the source material for this thesis has been largely drawn from the Channel 4 archives. One of the major achievements of the AHRC Channel 4 and British Film Culture project has been gaining permission, after a two-year negotiation with Channel 4, to access to the archive through means of a legal agreement. This has allowed access to information on key personnel and film titles, and yielded useful information such as press cuttings, private correspondence, memos, press information on specific films, duty logs, viewing figures and audience



research. In addition, Rosie Gleeson and Evike Galadja in the Channel 4 archives department have compiled databases of statistical information relating to film investment figures, film festival awards and transmission dates. This data has been invaluable in compiling a complete database (Appendix 2) of Channel 4 films for the years 1992-1998 (which has built upon John Pym's initial 1982-1991 survey). Another main use of the Channel 4 archive has been in qualifying and correcting information found in the trade press, as some investment figures and production details published in newspapers and journals like *Screen Finance* and *AIP&Co* are not always accurate.

Other useful sources drawn from this archive include Film on Four public opinion polls conducted by the Channel's research department, memos between Commissioning Editors and upper management at the Channel, and correspondence between the Drama Department and film producers. Chapters 1 and 2 of this thesis in particular have drawn upon audience research commissioned by the Channel on the popularity of seasons by age group and socio-economic standing. Research reports commissioned shortly after David Aukin took over as Head of Drama in 1990 regarding the popularity/awareness of Film on Four among audiences and the effectiveness of advertising on television and in cinemas were also particularly revealing. The research showed that the Drama Department under Aukin were becoming increasingly aware of the need to improve ratings, particularly among younger viewers, a factor which this thesis argues was symptomatic of the increasingly commercial focus of the Channel in the early 1990s. In addition, festival fliers, season previews, promotional material and comprehensive press cuttings files on individual films accessed through the Channel 4 archive have considerably

informed the detailed analyses of Film on Four seasons and productions undertaken throughout this thesis.

The Channel's weekly Press Information Packs have also been a key resource in conducting this research. The packs, distributed to the British press each week from 1982, were revolutionary in terms of the detailed scheduling and programme information they included. Thanks to the British Universities Film and Video Council, funded by (and in collaboration with) the AHRC Channel 4 and British Film Culture project, the complete published run of press packs are now available online to higher education institutions in the UK.<sup>38</sup> The Press Information Packs were useful in laying the groundwork for the filmography of Films on Four included in the appendices of this thesis, while the scheduling information contained in the packs have been helpful in determining ways in which Film on Four seasons were organised and presented. Information on repeat seasons, such as the Film on Four 'Take Two' seasons and particularly the January 1993 season celebrating Film on Four's 'Greatest Hits' offer insights into which productions the Channel considers to have been influential successes and why, as well as gaining some sense into the Channel's own perceived cultural impact on British film.

The Channel's annual reports include a useful summary of the performances of Film on Four productions in terms of festival awards received. The reports also provide an overview of the Channel's changing policy decisions on a year-by-year basis. Channel 4 publications aimed specifically at independent producers have also been particularly useful, as these set out the commissioning process from script submission to contract stage. For example, the Channel's 1994/5 publication 'This is Channel 4' offers a detailed explanation of the commissioning process, as well as a list of relevant personnel/Commissioning Editors at the Channel.<sup>39</sup> Publications like

these have been invaluable in building a picture of the ways in which executives at the Channel worked with and encouraged new filmmaking talent, and the manner in which film commissioning was institutionalised within a broadcast context.

## **Interviews**

Interviews with the former and current heads of Film on Four/FilmFour David Rose, David Aukin, Paul Webster and Tessa Ross have enabled considerable insight into Channel 4's policy towards film, particularly in revealing cultural policy within the Drama Department as well as providing a detailed insight into the commissioning and filmmaking processes. Interviews with film producers like Stephen Woolley and Tim Bevan have also been invaluable in terms of examining the Channel's dealings with producers and filmmakers, as well as providing insights into the relationship between film financing and creative and cultural decision making. Interviews with marketing personnel at the Channel such as Head of Acquisitions Colin Leventhal and former Head of Film Four International Bill Stephens have yielded information about international sales, rights and distribution (which would be extremely difficult to find elsewhere). In studying the roles of individuals within Channel 4 as an organisation as well as gathering information about the production contexts of specific films, it is to some extent necessary to rely on first-hand accounts and experiences. Indeed, much of the information contained in this thesis was drawn from an archive of over twenty original interviews.

One must also acknowledge the limitations of drawing upon interview testimony in academic research. Some of these limitations are generally relevant to any use of oral histories; for example, some interviewees discuss moments in the distant past of their lives and careers, and events can be misremembered or tainted

by the experiences of the present. However, within the context of this research, a number of other problems have to be addressed. For example, many interviewees currently working in the film and television industries are wary of divulging information which might be seen as 'sensitive' - for example, financial information or information about sales, marketing and distribution partners. Some producers currently working in film are also perhaps reluctant to discuss their experiences of past productions candidly, as future employment could depend on maintaining amiable relationships with professional peers. Furthermore, as Andrew Spicer notes, interviewees also 'tend to present themselves in a favourable light and to portray themselves as central to the creative process.'<sup>40</sup> While drawing upon interview testimony as a key 'ethnographic' resource, these limitations will be observed.

### **Methodology and Structure**

As outlined above, because this thesis examines British film culture of the 1980s and 90s through the very specific lens of a television broadcaster, and because the nature of the relationships between institutional policies and structures, creative personnel in the film and television industries and the films produced is necessarily complex, the diversity of sources consulted requires a corresponding range of critical approaches to interpretation. The sample database compiled in Appendix 2 invites quantitative analyses of the range of film types, their budgets and the mixed patterns of investment Channel 4 undertook in order to spread risk across its slate. It also reveals the extent of cyclical variation in the Channel's fortunes. The Olsberg SPI report and sources such as *Stories We Tell Ourselves* and *Opening our Eyes* rehearse similar attempts to measure cultural and economic impact of British film and Channel 4's contribution to that impact. And audience data compiled by the Channel can be interpreted as an index of the changing demographic to which successive

Commissioning Editors sought to appeal. But empirical data, though useful, cannot tell the whole story, and the key questions posed by this thesis about creative practices within institutional structures involve policy analysis, the interpretation of archival materials such as correspondence, minutes, internal reports, and press releases. And the judicious use of key concepts borrowed from Communication Studies can help to frame the analysis of corporate structures, the influence of changes in personnel, and the interpretation of interview testimony.

Interviews have allowed a detailed insight into the commissioning process and the production history behind different films and filmmaking practices, which in turn has fed into the questions posed in this thesis about how working practices changed in the industry due to the involvement of Channel 4. Interviews with Commissioning Editors provide an insight into how Channel 4 works as an institution – key to those arguments about commissioning, personal agency and the history of Film on Four discussed in Part One. A key function of the interviews is also that, when used in conjunction with archive research, they provide some measure of triangulation. For example, the trade press is not always accurate, media interviews can be skewed by particular agendas, but using interviews in conjunction with archival research enables us to get a fuller picture of Channel 4's role in British film history.

Archival research has also helped with the detailed case studies in this thesis, providing information on the production history of a number of films. Furthermore, this has provided an insight into managerial structures at the Channel, thus enabling engagement with questions regarding the relationship between creativity and commercialism at the Channel as well as charting its changing broadcasting ecology over time. The information extrapolated from the Channel 4 database (drawn mainly

from the Channel 4 archives) was also used to note trends in Films on Four and changing production and distribution practices over time, which considerably helped with the historical questions with which this thesis has engaged. Finally, although textual analyses of films is not the central focus of this thesis, its survey of films produced has necessarily drawn upon thematic commonalities, stylistic variations and genre analysis, considering aesthetic debates between traditions of realism and art-house experimentation, the heritage film and the romantic comedy, and Channel 4's nurturing of new talent and support for successive generations of notable British *auteurs*.

This thesis will focus on the years 1982-1998, the years when Channel 4 funded films were broadcast on the 'Film on Four' slot, and will follow the structure outlined below. Part One contextualises the history of Film on Four, its identity as a broadcast strand and the scope and influence of its output on the British cinema of the 1980s and early 1990s. This section will also reprise the controversies and debates which surrounded the Channel's decision to fund feature film production for television broadcast and theatrical release at home and abroad. Chapter 1 discusses the Channel's policy towards film, and how this changed over time. This chapter also introduces some key figures at Channel 4 (notably David Rose and David Aukin) and lays the groundwork for some key issues which will be discussed later in this thesis, such as the relationship between filmmakers and the Channel and role of creative individuals in broadcasting institutions. Chapter 1 will also provide an analysis of selected Film on Four seasons in order to engage with ideas about the identity of Film on Four as a broadcast strand, to provide some indication of the scope and variety of films that the Channel funded, and how this changed from the 1980s (under Rose's aegis) to the 1990s (under Aukin).

Chapter 2 deals in part with responses from filmmakers and critics regarding the impact of the 'convergence' of film and television in the early 1980s. As this ground has been well-covered elsewhere, however, this chapter will mainly focus on the creative and institutional determinants which formed the 'identity' of Film on Four as discussed in Chapter 1. This chapter will examine the relationship which early Films on Four shared with the BBC single plays of the 1960s and 1970s. In particular, it will seek to draw parallels between Film on Four and BBC Pebble Mill, a largely autonomous outfit based in Birmingham in the 1970s and run by David Rose, in terms of a crossover of creative personnel and filmmakers and a shared visual aesthetic in terms of a shared emphasis on place, space and the regional (aesthetic themes which very much characterised Rose's tenure at Pebble Mill and Film on Four). Although this thesis is largely a production study, this chapter will also touch upon some of the aesthetic trends which have been noted in Films on Four by various scholars in order to offer some insights into the stylistic influences of Channel 4 on British cinema, and also to note links between these emerging visual trends and Film on Four policy and production practices.

Part Two is concerned with Channel 4's impact on the British film industry and its relationships with filmmakers. Chapter 3 deals with the Channel's relationships with independent companies, and offers case studies of small and large companies which enjoyed ongoing relationships with the Channel; namely Palace Pictures, a production and distribution outfit which was formed in the early 1980s and which specialised in cult products, and Working Title, a company which (in its early years) was consistently funded by the Channel. The key aim of this chapter will be to analyse some of the industrial and structural determinants which caused some companies (like Working Title) to flourish, and others (like Palace) to fail. This

chapter will also set out the context of the British film industry in the 1980s and 1990s, examining the Channel's impact on the independent sector and importance as a source of funding for independent producers.

Chapter 4 will move away from discussion about the industry and independents to focus on working relationships and personal creativity. Considering the fact that finding and encouraging new talent has always been a part of the Film on Four's core objectives, one of the key aims of this chapter will be to look at the ways in which the Channel nurtured talent and provided support for filmmakers. Chapter 4 should be seen as bringing together many of the core issues discussed throughout this thesis relating to working practices in film and television, creativity within institutional contexts and the relationship between creativity and commercialism in broadcasting (specifically with regard to Channel 4's own PSB remit).

Popular perceptions of the Channel's industrial and cultural legacy at home and abroad will form the basis for Part Three of this thesis. Chapter 5 will look at how Films on Four have been distributed, exhibited and received in Europe and the USA, focusing on the Channel's relationships with marketing companies (specifically US company Miramax) in order to analyse the ways in which Channel 4 films have been packaged and sold to different audiences. This chapter will also look in some detail at the Channel's relationship with Europe, and the importance of festival circuits in attracting cultural prestige for Films on Four and in gaining distribution in specialised markets. The main theme of this chapter is 'how films travel', and with this in mind, discussion will also turn to the ways in which the international reception of Films on Four can change public perception of these films in the UK. Case studies of two films, *The Crying Game* (Neil Jordan, 1992), which



was distributed by Miramax in North America, and Ken Loach's *Riff Raff* (1991) which achieved some success in Europe, will be used to better illustrate this argument.

Finally, Chapter 6 focuses on the perceived cultural legacy of Films on Four. It asks: which Channel 4-funded films have been consecrated by critics and cultural institutions as being part of the canon of 'top' or 'best' British films of all time? This question is particularly important because it provides a starting point in calling for a much needed revisionist history of Film on Four. Given the sheer variety and amount of productions the Channel has funded since 1982 (over 400) relatively few have made it into the annals of British cinema history. What happened to the hundreds of 'forgotten' Films on Four, and why have some productions been prioritised over others? This chapter will argue that the answer to these questions lies in a study of how Films on Four have been distributed in ancillary markets (DVD and Video on Demand) as much as it does in a study of box office performance and critical reception. This chapter will also look at how Channel 4 as an institution has constructed its identity as a producer of British film and a contributor to British film culture. How has the Channel capitalised on this image, and how important is Film on Four to the Channel's overall identity as a British broadcaster? This chapter will argue that this question is as relevant today as it is historically. In the following chapter, this thesis will turn to look at Film on Four's history, policies and working practices.

## **Part One**

### **Cinema and Television: ‘Lovers Now, Not Neighbours’**

# Chapter 1

## Film on Four: changing policies, shifting identities

### Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to discuss Channel 4's policy towards film and explain the Channel's film funding practices. This chapter will also look at how the identity of Film on Four changed during the 1980s and 1990s, taking into account the influence of Commissioning Editors David Rose and David Aukin on these changes in direction. The idea of 'policy' as outlined in the title of this chapter may be misleading, however. Though Channel 4 as a broadcaster has had a very specific set of policies, which were outlined in their annual policy documents, there is little evidence to suggest that Film on Four was approached with any defined and detailed commissioning strategy, either in 1982 or when David Aukin took over as Head of Drama in 1990. The aim of this chapter is to provide some context for the rest of this thesis in terms of the ways in which films were commissioned and funded, and how the Drama Department worked creatively. Though many of the ideas outlined here will be discussed in greater detail in Part Two, this chapter will attempt to lay the groundwork for this discussion. This chapter will also argue that the 'identity' of Film on Four is as much characterised by the broadcast of Film on Four as a season 'strand' as it is by the Channel's film funding policies. In academic and critical accounts Films on Four are often described or labelled as being 'social realist', 'contemporary', or 'art-house' in aesthetic. This chapter will discuss the accuracy of these labels with reference to the output of Film on Four in the 1980s and 1990s through a broad analyses of Film on Four seasons throughout this period.

### Policy? What policy?

This list below is an overview of Film on Four's policy, written by David Aukin in 1996. The list is partly facetious, taking a tongue-in-cheek view of the differences between television and film (implying that while broadcasters have policies, film producers do not). However, it also arguably serves as a very simple and useful overview of Film on Four policy at different times between 1982-1998. This list is also quite rare – it is difficult to find information about the Channel's film policy written down in such a prescriptive way. Indeed, point 10 jokingly reinforces exactly just how non-prescriptive it actually was by highlighting the fact that most of these points have been ignored at various stages throughout the life of Film on Four.

'Channel 4's Policy towards Film', by David Aukin.

1. To encourage predominantly British filmmakers to make films that will work both in cinemas and on television
2. To provide opportunities for filmmakers at the start of their careers
3. To commission the most talented filmmakers available
4. To commission films that would not be made without our finance
5. To commission films so that they can be made as intended by the filmmaker, with the proviso that we are not only Commissioners but also editors
6. To encourage filmmakers from all sections of society
7. To encourage films which can work within the industry but at the same time retain an individual voice and identity
8. To encourage the making of films from original screenplays dealing with contemporary themes rather than adaptations or the dreaded biopic
9. To only commission films where the Commissioning Editor is passionate about the material
10. To ignore all of the above except number 9.<sup>1</sup>

Aukin's list is worth examining systematically. Point one states that the Channel should 'encourage predominantly British filmmakers to make films that will work

both in cinemas and on television.’ The idea that films could work both theatrically and on television was perhaps one of the trickiest aspects of the Channel’s approach to film, however, and one which has generated the most debate on an industrial as well as an aesthetic level. Furthermore, throughout the 1980s and 90s the Channel also supported and co-funded a number of European productions, including Wim Wenders’ *Paris, Texas* and Louis Malle’s *Damage* (1996), sometimes to criticisms that it was not doing enough to support British directors. Channel 4 was involved in around 270 productions to 1998, providing opportunities to new filmmaking talent, bringing greater variety to the output of the British film industry and arguably sustaining the life force of that industry throughout the 1980s and early 1990s, when finance was particularly scarce. However, not everyone has seen the benefit of this. For example, Don Boyd famously argued that Channel 4 has taught British cinema to ‘think small’, to rely on predominantly low budget and visually unambitious modes of filmmaking.<sup>2</sup> In general, there are challenges in talking about productions made for both film and television. Indeed, as noted in the introduction to this thesis, there is a whole body of academic scholarship relating to the aesthetic and technological similarities and differences between cinema and television. Some of this scholarship (notably work by John Hill and Martin McLoone [1996]<sup>3</sup> and more recently Jason Jacobs and Stephen Peacock [2013]) has been concerned with the question: what makes a film ‘cinematic’?<sup>4</sup> David Rose has argued that many of the plays he produced at Pebble Mill in the 1970s were films but without the benefit of a theatrical release. These ideas will be unpacked in greater detail in Chapter 2, but it is worth noting here that definitions of the ‘cinematic’ have historically been intangible among industry professionals, critics and academics. For Film on Four Commissioning Editors it was also difficult to tell whether a film might work *both* in

the cinema and on television. For example, Stephen Frears' *My Beautiful Laundrette* is an example of a film which was shot on 16mm and made for television but which did very well theatrically. As we shall see, whether a Film on Four secured theatrical release largely depended on the interest of distributors. Furthermore, the decision of whether to invite distributors to buy rested with the company which had majority rights in the production, which was not necessarily Channel 4.

Point two illustrates the Channel's commitment to new talent, and indeed around half of all of the commissioned Films on Four between 1982 and 1998 provided opportunities to writers and directors making their feature film debuts. However, the Channel also consistently worked with many established filmmakers like Ken Loach, Mike Leigh and Stephen Frears. Point five states that the films should be made as intended by the filmmaker, although David Aukin in particular could, on occasion, be editorially difficult. For example, in 1992 he famously refused to release the money for *The Crying Game* (Neil Jordan, 1992) until the script had been re-written to his satisfaction, which took 17 redrafts.<sup>5</sup> In point eight Aukin is disdainful of the 'dreaded biopic', though *The Madness of King George* was one of the most successful films he commissioned during his time at the Channel. David Rose had also expressed a dislike for adaptations and Second World War dramas, but he also funded the E. M. Forster adaptations *A Room with a View* (James Ivory, 1985) and *Maurice* (James Ivory, 1987). Furthermore, Michael Radford's *Another Time, Another Place* (1983), which is both an adaptation and a Second World War drama, was one of the most successful early Films on Four, winning a BAFTA and an Evening Standard British Film Award in 1984.<sup>6</sup> Point nine illustrates that in terms of the types of films the Channel funded, in many cases this was simply a matter of the personal taste of the Commissioning Editor— but even this tended to be vague.

David Rose was difficult to pin down on exactly what he thought constituted a good Film on Four script, simply stipulating that they should be 'fresh' and 'unfamiliar, if possible'.<sup>7</sup> David Aukin was equally ambiguous, stating in an interview that 'I don't really know what a Channel 4 film is, except that when you see it, you know it.'<sup>8</sup>

Point ten jokingly notes the policy to 'ignore all of the above'. This point in particular outlines a key issue that must be discussed when thinking about Film on Four's remit, its policy and the way in which it operated. It was Jeremy Isaacs and David Rose who originally determined the direction of Film on Four, strongly influenced by the German ZDF model. Within Channel 4's wider remit to encourage innovation in the form and content of its programming, they agreed that the Channel would fund some twenty films per year for theatrical release and television broadcast at home and abroad, that these films would provide a platform for encouraging established filmmakers and introducing new writing and directorial talent, and that many of the films funded would be non-commercial features that might not otherwise be made. But beyond this outline, policy was neither restrictive nor prescriptive. According to David Rose, it was also rarely talked about within the department:

There was no clear policy. I was simply asked to commission films that we felt would work in the cinema. They were films; they were for Channel 4 viewers. I have always based any judgement on the quality of writing and direction. We made them to cinema standards on 35mm.<sup>9</sup>

Film on Four operated as part of Channel 4, as part of the Channel's programming output but also in some ways as a film producer. In the selection of likely scripts for production, in having editorial input at the pre-production and post-production stages and in seeing films through to theatrical release, Aukin, Rose and their teams carried out many of the actions which would have been typical of a film studio. Unlike

broadcasters, film companies tend not to have clearly defined policies because in the film industry, variety and adaptability is the key to success. Within the Drama Department, Rose and Aukin enjoyed a large degree of autonomy, which meant that with Films on Four, creative decisions were usually taken by one person. This, coupled with the lack of need for a prescriptive policy, arguably indicates recognition on the part of the Channel that selecting potential films for production involves a large degree flexibility and risk, and thus necessarily depends very much on personal taste, instinct, and the freedom to make decisions.

The process of film financing within the BBC was far more bureaucratic; David Aukin's counterpart Mark Shivas would have to defer to various committees before he could commit to a production.<sup>10</sup> To illustrate, in 1997 Scala producer Nik Powell stated that the Channel 'delegated the decision making process to one person or a team of people with no interference from above' which made it 'much easier to deal with than its colleagues at the BBC'.<sup>11</sup> Similarly, Mike Leigh's *Secrets and Lies* (1996) was in development with the BBC for 15 months before a deal was finally put in place. After it began to look as though this might fall through, Aukin was able to commission the film for Channel 4 within a matter of days.<sup>12</sup> The creative autonomy of Rose and Aukin was, in many ways, protected. Although Film on Four under Aukin did indeed begin to function with an eye to commercial viability, this freedom was in many ways protected by guaranteed budgets and a strong cultural imperative. As Paul Webster noted, Film on Four under Rose and Aukin:

was a creative model, not an economic model... It had the trappings of a business under David Aukin but nevertheless he didn't have to answer to any economic brief whatsoever... David basically refused to answer any question he was asked about the economic value of anything he did, because he argued that [he had a] solely creative brief, which was fantastic.<sup>13</sup>



This also meant that for filmmakers, funding was not doled out according to checklists and committees. It was more readily available to producers with fewer restrictive criteria than perhaps would be the case with film funding bodies.

However, Film on Four also behaved in some ways as a public subsidy body, in that it funded projects according to cultural merit and did not always expect to make a profit on these productions. Thus, Film on Four has often acted both as a film company, and as part of an organisation with a clear cultural remit with regard to supporting new talent and funding non-commercial productions, and this has arguably been reflected in its policies and *modus operandi*.

### **Creative commissioning?**

Channel 4 was markedly different from other broadcasters in that it was a commissioner and buyer of programming rather than a producer. In the case of Film on Four (as with other departments) it was possible for anyone to submit a script or treatment, which could be submitted independently or through an already established production company. From 1982, David Rose and his department regularly received around 2000 scripts and treatments per year, while David Aukin regularly received between 60-100 scripts per week.<sup>14</sup> These would then be condensed into synopses by a team of readers, with likely submissions to be discussed by Senior Commissioning Editors at fortnightly meetings.<sup>15</sup> Another feature which set the Channel apart from other broadcasters was the fact that it was less hierarchical in its management structure. However, as broadcast hours increased and the editorial team grew, this became increasingly unfeasible. Michael Grade's arrival in 1988 saw some internal restructuring, and further reorganization when the Channel moved towards selling its own advertising in 1993, with an obvious growth in advertising and sales

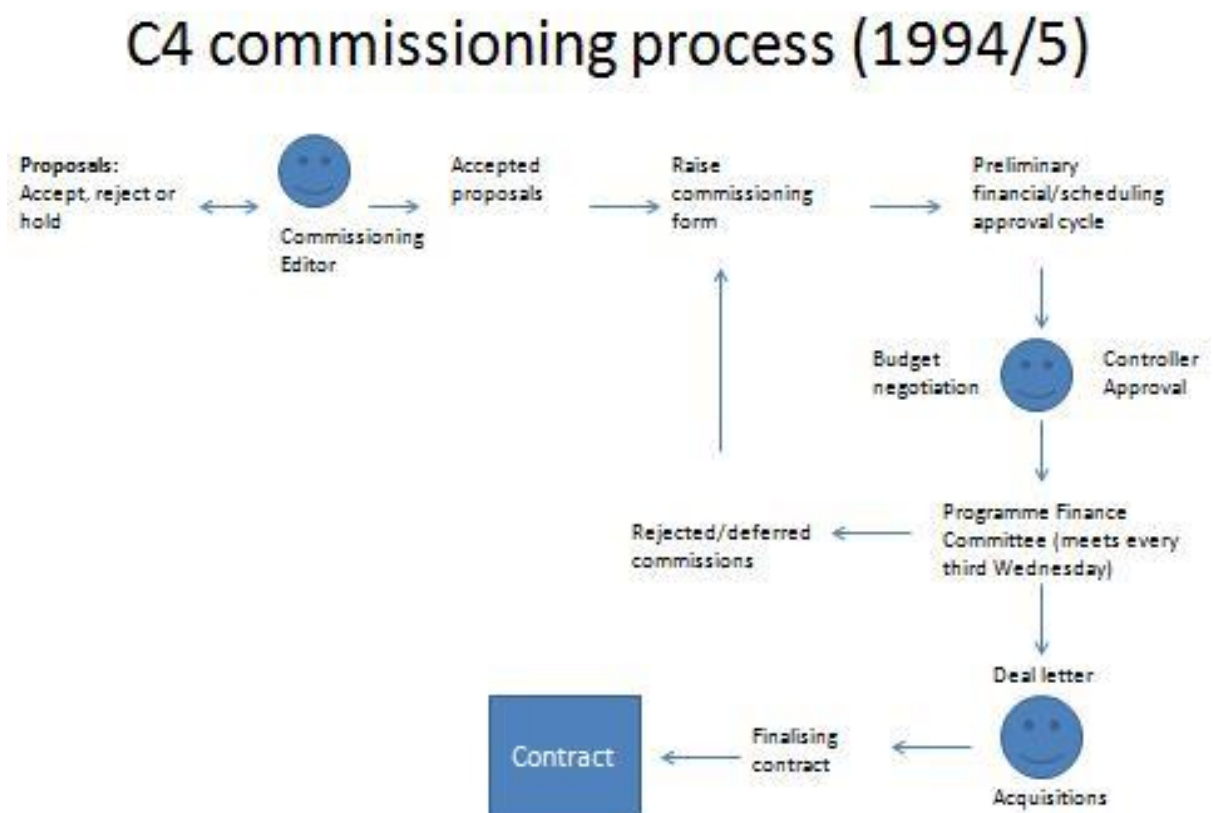
departments.<sup>16</sup> However, throughout these changes, Film on Four remained largely autonomous within the Drama Department and the wider structure of the Channel.

For example, while many commissioned scripts would have been reviewed by Jeremy Isaacs, the Chief Executive normally avoided direct interference, even where he did not agree with particular aspects of the commission.<sup>17</sup> According to Isaacs, it was a 'hands-off' relationship that worked very well. Discussing Rose's achievements in 2004, he wrote: 'It is not just what David did that is instructive, but how he did it: no committees of consultants; no focus groups or market-testing. Just an eye for a situation, a nose for a script, and a mind of his own to make the critical judgement'.<sup>18</sup> David Aukin enjoyed a similar level of autonomy, stating in an interview in 1995, 'what I commission is a reflection of my own personal taste and judgement; it would be difficult having to defer to committees. There is a very simple chain of command: I am responsible to John Willis (Director of Programming) and then Michael Grade'.<sup>19</sup> Grade also stated that he had apparently never read a Film on Four script, preferring to allow Aukin a '*totally* free rein'.<sup>20</sup>

David Rose was responsible for Fiction (and later 'Drama') but he did have increasing help in the form of script editor Walter Donohue and playwright David Benedictus.<sup>21</sup> After Benedictus left, Peter Ansorge joined the team, as well as assistant Commissioning Editor Karin Bamborough who had previously worked in the Arts department of the Channel under Michael Kustow. Bamborough often dealt with issues arising from *Brookside*, although she also commissioned the playwright Hanif Kureishi to write *My Beautiful Laundrette* for the Channel, and stepped in to save Chris Bernard's *Letter to Brezhnev* from financial ruin in 1984.<sup>22</sup> The drama 'team' remained fairly small throughout the life of Film on Four. For example, when

David Aukin joined the Channel he worked with Colin Leventhal and Sarah Geater, who dealt with legal and financial issues and cost accounting, leaving Aukin relatively free to focus on commissioning the work.<sup>23</sup> Aukin also hired help in the form of American script editor Jack Lechner (who helped with the troubled script editing and pre-production of Neil Jordan's *The Crying Game* in 1991). Jack Lechner was succeeded by Assistant Commissioning Editor Allon Reich, who, among other things, was responsible for the Drama Department's short film strand Short and Curlies.<sup>24</sup>

**Figure 1.1:** The Channel 4 commissioning process



(Source: *AIP & Co*)

This raises an interesting issue; namely, that when dealing with institutional structures, broadcasting policy and funding models, it is important to find a way of talking about the creative influence of individuals, especially where they have a relatively free rein. Andrew Spicer has argued that the role of the producer has long been neglected both in television and film, with authorship usually being attributed to the director (in the case of a film) or to the writer (in television drama) despite the collaborative nature of production. He discusses the idea of the ‘Creative Producer’, and argues that focusing on the critically marginalised role of the producer can provide greater insight into the production process as well as shedding light on the sometimes considerable creative influence of the producer upon productions.<sup>25</sup>

Aukin and Rose were not film producers in the traditional sense, although the policy of seeing films through from script to distribution stage meant that Rose and Aukin enjoyed an almost paternalistic role more closely associated with a studio executive rather than a television producer. Indeed, the job of Rose and Aukin was to provide a space where writers and filmmakers could flourish, and to be confident in exercising taste and judgement in selecting scripts and backing productions. Aukin was headhunted for his role as Head of Drama by Senior Commissioning Editor Liz Forgan. According to Aukin, the Channel did not hire a Commissioning Editor with hands-on filmmaking experience because, as she stated, ‘your job isn’t to make the films; it’s to choose the people and the projects.’<sup>26</sup>

Rose and Aukin could almost be called ‘creative Commissioning Editors’. However, this term is used very loosely. When considering the influence of the ‘creative Commissioning Editor’, any detailed analysis of creative input on

individual productions is likely to be unhelpful, as we might instead be dealing with the vision of the director and the cinematographer. Rather, we can identify the particular creative influences of Aukin and Rose at the level of commissioning, of personal choice, and by taking into account the whole body of films commissioned in each era in which they worked as Commissioning Editors for Fiction/Drama. Sometimes this is thematic, and with Rose influences can be seen over a wide range of commissioned productions. Aukin's influence can arguably be seen more in the changing policy and direction of Film on Four and in the variety and types of films he funded.

In a recent interview, producer Stephen Woolley noted the difference between working with David Rose and David Aukin:

David Rose...was acting like a patron of the arts. Someone who would be giving money to, to...here you are, Peter Greenaway, here's your 100 grand, or 200 grand, or your 400 grand, and who's your producer? ... Whereas I think David Aukin recognized that the distasteful world out there is the same world. We live in that world. There's not much we can do about it. And if you want to see good movies being made, if you want to see *Trainspotting* being made and properly released in America... you're going to have to embrace some of those distasteful people.<sup>27</sup>

This suggests the difference in methods of working between Rose and Aukin, with Aukin being more willing to engage with the commercial details. Aukin has also been known to work against the objectives of filmmakers and producers in the interests of the quality of a production. For example, in 1991, he fought a sustained campaign against Neil Jordan's script for *The Crying Game*, refusing to release the 800,000 that the Channel was investing until Neil Jordan had redrafted the script to his satisfaction.<sup>28</sup> Aukin also encouraged Richard Curtis to make revisions to his script for *Four Weddings and a Funeral* (Mike Newell, 1994) because he felt that the

characters were not developed sufficiently. He also stipulated that the film could not shoot until the Spring of that year as 'this was not a Winter film' which infuriated PolyGram, the other company backing the production.<sup>29</sup>

David Aukin took over as Head of Drama in 1990, following his time as chief executive of the National Theatre. At first he was very much an unknown quantity to filmmakers, having had no previous experience of film production. However, finding and encouraging new talent was equally as important to David Aukin as it had been to David Rose, and he was also anxious that Film on Four should continue to take risks, even though the Channel was facing the move towards selling its own advertising in 1993. Aukin was also concerned with having a higher degree of editorial control, in funding fewer films while investing more equity in each, thus having more of a say in the direction of the production. However, while Aukin's influence on policy is easily identifiable, thematic continuities across the films he commissioned are harder to recognize, perhaps because his commissions really broadened the range of films that the Channel sponsored. Whereas with many of the Films on Four of the 1980s we can identify a very contemporary, social realist aesthetic, after 1990 one can note a very definite change in direction. Indeed, Aukin has cited one film in particular as providing the catalyst for that change. In 1991, the Channel entered into a co-production with Palace Pictures on the Richard Stanley film *Dust Devil*, a supernatural fantasy horror set in Namibia about a demonic creature that poses as a hitchhiker and preys on lonely drifters. Though the production background of this film will be examined in more detail in Chapter 3, it is worth noting here that the commission was a conscious decision on the part of Aukin to sever the last link with BBC single plays and herald a move away from the types of production that Film on Four had been perceived as making in the past: visually

unambitious, social-realist films. For Aukin, the Channel made ‘feature films’, and he argued that the idea of making a film and *then* deciding to put it in the cinema was the wrong approach.<sup>30</sup> Indeed, throughout the 1980s, around 60% of Films on Four had gained theatrical exposure.<sup>31</sup> Under Aukin, this moved closer to 90%.

Aukin was often accused by critics of taking Film on Four in a more commercial direction. He had a tendency to be interested in the more visually thrilling, and did not shy away from commissioning genre films like *Dust Devil* or *Shallow Grave* (Danny Boyle, 1994). However, to say that this is what Film on Four became would be misleading. Aukin’s tenure was characterised by variety. He would take greater equity stakes in larger budget productions like Louise Malle’s *Damage*, but continued to fully fund uncommercial films like *Riff Raff* for modest amounts, even though, as he stated, ‘the sales people loathed the fact that I kept supporting Ken Loach, [but] I felt it was part of my job to maintain the support for these proven directors.’<sup>32</sup> He also invested in small-scale international co-productions like Allison Anders’ *Mi Vida Loca* (1993) and continued to fund more experimental films like Terence Davies’ *The Neon Bible* (1995). Like Rose, Aukin was considerably influenced by his previous career, and sought to marry the artistic and the innovative with popular appeal. He stated: ‘I’ve spent my time in the theatre trying to make quality work popular and accessible to as wide a public as possible. I never took pride in producing wonderful work and then nobody turning up. Try doing good work people also want to see. That’s the challenge.’<sup>33</sup> Aukin increasingly adopted the rhetoric of a film studio, referring to Film on Four’s yearly ‘slate’ and ‘strike rate’, and ran Film on Four much in the way of a film company, commissioning a wide variety of films while realising that in terms of theatrical success (where the Channel had equity stakes), two thirds of those films might flop, a couple might

break even and one or two might be very successful. In this era, the relationship between commercial and cultural imperatives became more complex, although low-budget filmmaking remained a firm part of Film on Four even though many productions were increasingly viewed with more of an eye to audience reception and theatrical distribution.

Thus, the output and direction of Film on Four was very much driven by personal taste. David Rose and David Aukin both had a considerable influence on the strand, both at the level of script selection and editorial input. Though the idea of the 'creative Commissioning Editor' will be elaborated upon in more detail in Chapter 4 of this thesis, it is important to note here that between the wider broadcasting structures of Channel 4 and the actual commissioned output of Film on Four, the individual creativity of Rose and Aukin was hugely influential. While the above section has looked at the influence of Commissioning Editors on the policy and direction of Film on Four, this next section will look at Film on Four's identity as a broadcast strand through an analysis of selected seasons between 1982 and 1998. This will enable us to gain an insight not only into the history of Film on Four, but also its position within Channel 4's wider broadcasting ecology over time.

### **Film on Four: shifting identities**

Although in secondary literature (and throughout this thesis) the term 'Film on Four' is used to denote the Channel's film commissioning activities, between 1982 and 1998 Film on Four was also a broadcast strand (on which the films were screened), and this was not always synonymous with the Channel's funding and co-production practices. Not all of the feature films funded by the Channel were shown on the strand, and not all Films on Four were funded by the Drama Department. For



example, the Multicultural Department funded Mira Nair's 1988 film *Salaam Bombay*, while the Education Department funded Derek Jarman's *Wittgenstein* (1993). Alan Fountain's Independent Film and Video Department could also fund a number of feature films each year, and the film buying department could also pre-buy the television rights to productions on occasion, as they did with Palace Picture's *The Pope Must Die* (1991) and with Working Title's *Map of the Human Heart* (1993). The Film on Four strand could also be used to promote the Channel's other filmmaking activities, as it did in Autumn 1989, Autumn 1990 and Summer 1992, when its usual slot was expressly given over to the Independent Film and Video department in order to celebrate their considerable contribution to filmmaking. The popularity of the strand was here used as a beacon of prestige, in order to publicise the Channel's wider efforts.

Having taken account of the diversity of contributions to the Film on Four strand, nonetheless its core business of showcasing specially commissioned new feature films provides a valuable index of the changes in the Channel's policy and identity as a film financier over time. For example, the first season of Film on Four shows the extent to which early Channel 4 films very much followed the style of the traditional single play for television. *Walter* (Stephen Frears, 1982), broadcast on the first evening of the Channel's transmission, starred Ian McKellen as a mentally handicapped young man struggling to survive in an unsympathetic society. In its subject matter and aesthetic, *Walter* followed very much in the tradition of the socially conscious single play. *Walter* is likened to a caged bird, something Frears emphasises with his use of extreme close-ups in small spaces, and this sense of confinement works well on the television screen but would not, one suspects, in the cinema. *P'tang Yang Kipperbang* (Michael Apted, 1982), the second in this season

of ten films, deals with a young boy coming to terms with his adolescence and was made as a small-scale film by Goldcrest specifically for television.

However, within a couple of years the Channel had achieved considerable theatrical and critical successes with films like *My Beautiful Laundrette* and *Letter to Brezhnev*, and was also entering into high profile international co-productions like Wim Wenders' *Paris Texas*. This was reflected in the Channel's well-publicised 1987 Film on Four season. Promoted by the press as being Film on Four's 'most celebrated film season yet',<sup>34</sup> the films shown were very much representative of the different types of production that the Channel had funded throughout the decade. Films like *Cal* (Pat O'Connor, 1984) and *No Surrender* (Peter Smith, 1985) dealt with the political situation in Ireland, while *Letter to Brezhnev* and *The Chain* (Jack Gold, 1984) engaged with social issues. *She'll Be Wearing Pink Pyjamas* (John Goldschmidt, 1985) and *The Assam Garden* (Mary McMurray, 1985) dealt with themes of acceptance and personal growth, while *Another Country* (Marek Kanievski, 1984) provided an example of the kinds of glossy costume drama reminiscent of films like Merchant Ivory's *A Room With a View* and Mike Newell's *Dance with a Stranger* (1985). *My Beautiful Laundrette* was a politically conscious film originally made for television, but was recognised as offering impressive visual originality and a fresh approach to issues like race and homosexuality; while films like *Caravaggio* (Derek Jarman, 1986) and *A Zed and Two Noughts* (Peter Greenaway, 1986) represented the Channel's consistent support for experimental directors. This season also included strange curios which did not seem to fit into any particular tradition. *The Company of Wolves* (Neil Jordan, 1984), a cult film based on a fairytale which drew stylistically upon the films of Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger, seemed startlingly out of place in the British cinema of the early 1980s.

*Billy the Kid and the Green Baize Vampire* (Alan Clarke, 1987), a musical about a young boy who takes on the world snooker champion, was not successful, although the fact that this unconventional film was commissioned in the first place is notable. The season was well publicised in Channel 4's weekly Press Information Packs, and gained the Channel its highest ever viewing figures in Film on Four's history. And as the Channel's 1988 Annual Report was keen to point out, this was 'mostly for films in which the style or content was more controversial, like *Letter to Brezhnev*.'<sup>35</sup>

Arguably, the publicity surrounding this season reflects the significance of Film on Four within the Channel's wider cultural remit. In 1985, Justin Dukes wrote an internal policy document stating that Film on Four was important to the Channel for a number of reasons. It brought good audience figures, it represented the support of a broadcaster for British film, and it also represented a revitalisation on the low-budget scale of British filmmaking.<sup>36</sup> The profitability of Film on Four was apparently not a pressing issue. Around 7% of the Channel's annual budget went towards Film on Four, which meant that the Channel was spending approximately one twelfth of its budget making just twenty programmes out of a total of 3000 hours of programming.<sup>37</sup> In 1983 Jeremy Isaacs admitted that this was problematic, but stated that, 'on the other hand, these things have a socio-cultural provenance and purpose, as well as being simply a contribution to the ratings.'<sup>38</sup> Film on Four was also seen as important in garnering awards and critical acclaim for the Channel, through theatrical release and participation in festivals. Between 1982 and 1985, thirty-four of the sixty films funded through Film on Four had cinema screenings, and twenty-five of those films had received awards and been selected for film festivals. According to Dukes, 'all of this has greatly enhanced the Channel's public image as a responsible and creative ingredient in British broadcasting.'<sup>39</sup>

Channel 4 effectively created the identity of the Film on Four strand through the structuring of its seasons and through the publicity surrounding those seasons, and this was of course very much influenced by the critical reception and box office success garnered by each production. In the mid-to-late 1980s the Channel also began screening repeat seasons of Film on Four under the titles of Take Two and Film on Four Extra, and an analysis of these seasons effectively gives a sense of what the Channel considered to be its most successful and culturally influential films. In January 1993, the Channel screened a repeat season entitled 'Film on Four's Greatest Hits' to mark the tenth anniversary of the strand. The Channel 4 Season Information Packs stated that: 'This season features 13 of the most popular and successful Film on Four's to have emerged over the past decade which proves how closely Channel 4 has been associated with the biggest recent successes of the British film industry.'<sup>40</sup> The season was indeed representative of the diversity of successful films the Drama Department funded, ranging from the obvious choices such as *My Beautiful Laundrette* to perhaps more obscure choices like Michael Radford's 1983 film *Another Time, Another Place*. Also included were John Boorman's *Hope and Glory* (1987), Stephen Frears' *Prick up your Ears* (1987), Mike Newell's *Dance with a Stranger* and Terence Davies' more experimental film *Distant Voices, Still Lives* (1988).<sup>41</sup>

However, David Aukin argues that there was perhaps a hint of desperation behind this celebration of Film on Four's achievements. The strand went through an 18-month hiatus between 1990 and 1991, as David Rose departed and David Aukin took over as Head of Drama. This meant that the Channel did not have much to show, and few of the films that were being released were having much of an impact.<sup>42</sup> Between 1990 and 1993, the Film on Four budget was also cut by 10%,

remaining steady at £11 million for three years.<sup>43</sup> More generally, the country and thus the film industry was suffering through a worldwide economic recession at this point. Added to this malaise, Aukin stated that there were very few fresh and innovative projects to match even Film on Four's relatively small budget: 'Do I have enough good projects in hand to justify making films? Although I have some, I don't have enough. I'm not just going to fill quotas'.<sup>44</sup> The viability of theatrical release was also an issue, and following a disappointing experience with Ken Loach's *Riff Raff*, which failed to secure decent exhibition in the UK, Aukin was reconsidering releasing Film on Four films in cinemas.<sup>45</sup>

It was around this point that Aukin considered diverting money from Film on Four to other areas such as video plays, drama series and single drama for these reasons.<sup>46</sup> Maggie Brown argues that it was Chief Executive Michael Grade's deep personal dislike of the strand that led to consideration of it being axed. She writes: 'he saw it as vanity publishing, there to make the Channel look good rather than to garner ratings', and argues that he was eventually won round by the considerable success of *Shallow Grave*, thereafter adopting something of a 'movie mogul' persona.<sup>47</sup> However, the situation was nowhere near as clear-cut, although the Channel had to some extent lost confidence in Film on Four. Aukin states that:

When I started it was made clear to me that Film [on] Four was not sacrosanct, and that if I thought it should be abandoned... the Channel would have been very happy. So I said 'well let me assess it'. And I did and after 6 or 7 months I came back and said 'No I think there's nothing wrong with the vase, it's just the flowers need to be differently arranged. The talent is there, and we've got the right vehicle to engage that talent'. I don't think that went down well with the Channel [laughs].<sup>48</sup>

For the first two or three years of Aukin's tenure, Film on Four was effectively on trial.<sup>49</sup> However, this was less to do with Michael Grade's own dislike of the strand,

and more to do with extenuating circumstances. After 1993, the Channel found itself under pressure in an era that saw the expansion of satellite channels and the new fifth channel, meaning that it had to adhere to its remit to be innovative and original and yet still be able to attract advertisers. As Ellis Cashmore argues:

Market forces traditionally lead to imitation, not originality. Channel 4's dilemma was compounded by the fact that it was and still is ostensibly non-profit making. Yet it has to swim in the same waters as overtly commercial stations when it bids for advertiser's money.<sup>50</sup>

The Channel faced the unusual position of being a commercial broadcaster that had to react to the pressures of the market, and yet adhere to the public service requirements set out in the 1980 and 1990 Broadcasting Acts.<sup>51</sup> In this new commercial environment, Channel 4 television executives had an uneasy relationship with film. They had little interest in it, according to Aukin, because of the three year holdback between theatrical release and television broadcast. They also naturally had more interest in television, and because Film on Four had not achieved any great successes during this hiatus period, there was a feeling that its greatest days were over.<sup>52</sup> There was also a feeling of uncertainty as to whether the Channel could survive through selling its own advertising, and Film on Four had to prove itself in this new commercial market.

Aukin cites *Shallow Grave* as being 'the film that turned the tide'<sup>53</sup> as the first Film on Four in years to recoup its costs at the domestic box office. Catherine Johnson argues that in the 1990s broadcasters like the BBC and Channel 4 began to utilise branding strategies as a means of survival in the new commercial market.<sup>54</sup>

From 1997 to 2001, Chief Executive Michael Jackson consciously conceived of the broadcaster as a brand to be exploited in the rapidly changing media market, launching a number of digital subscription channels such as FilmFour and E4.<sup>55</sup>

During Michael Grade's tenure, the Channel's brand identity was not as consciously exploited in the same way, but there had always been elements of Channel 4's programming which it endeavoured to promote as being a distinctive part of its identity. According to Aukin, following the huge commercial successes of films like *Shallow Grave*, *Four Weddings and a Funeral* and *Trainspotting*:

[Film on Four] became part of the branding of Channel 4, in the same way as Channel 4 News, they didn't have *Big Brother* then, but there are certain things that branded Channel 4, and Film Four became one of those.<sup>56</sup>

As we have seen from the above case studies, Film on Four had already developed a distinctive identity over the years which allowed the Channel to exploit the cultural prestige of the strand as part of its overall remit to provide distinctive and innovative programming. However, this suggests that after the commercial successes of the mid-1990s Film on Four became part of the Channel's 'brand' identity more so than ever before.

It was perhaps as a result of this success that the mid-1990s saw an increased commitment to British cinema on the part of the Channel. Michael Grade was especially keen to emphasise the value of Film on Four in terms of the fact that the strand helped the Channel to fulfil its PSB requirements. In 1996, Grade wrote:

The main purpose of Film on Four remains to help fulfil the basic remit with which the Channel was charged in the 1981 Broadcasting Act, and which was maintained verbatim in the 1990 Act: to provide the most distinctive and innovative dramatic work that we can for our viewers at home.<sup>57</sup>

He also stressed that the motivation for funding films was not profit, as even a film as commercially successful as *Four Weddings* would only contribute £3-4 million to a broadcaster with a turnover of over £300 million per year.<sup>58</sup> The worldwide success of *Four Weddings* arguably brought something much greater than profit to

the Channel; prestige, and a widespread recognition of Channel 4's commitment to British cinema.

This commitment was partly symptomatic of greater competition and the increasing need to retain the Channel's considerable yearly turnover. When the Channel began selling its own advertising, safety measures were put in place in the event that it failed to support itself. If the Channel dipped below 14% of the total advertising revenue, ITV would step in and provide 2%. If the Channel went above 14%, this would be divided equally between Channel 4 and the ITV companies.<sup>59</sup>

However, after the transition the Channel performed extremely well, which meant that in 1993 it was required to hand over £38 million to ITV, and £55 million in 1994.<sup>60</sup> Grade lobbied the Department of National Heritage (DNH), arguing that the current system was unnecessary and that it should be dropped to allow the Channel to divert more money into programming – specifically, to Film on Four. As an incentive to the DNH Grade pledged to double the budget of Film on Four if the system was dropped, a measure which he stated could boost the film industry and create 1000 jobs. He argued that:

Channel 4 is committed to film in a way that no-one else has been and we would dearly love to continue that support. Film lies at the core of our remit and was the only area of programming on which we made the case for changing the funding formula.<sup>61</sup>

In 1996 the government reduced the amount of revenue that the Channel was obliged to pay to ITV and set a cap on the reserve fund which acted as a safety net, allowing the Channel to keep an extra £35 million per year and allowing Grade to increase the budget of Film on Four to £22 million in 1997.<sup>62</sup>

The Channel was also facing competition over pay-tv rights. In 1995, it became embroiled in a bitter battle with BSkyB following a deal with British Screen



which stated that BSkyB could invest in a certain number of British Screen films in return for the rights to broadcast these productions on the Sky movie channels. Channel 4 was furious and ended its deal with British Screen as a result. Grade argued that if the Channel had invested a considerable sum of money in a film, it should have the sole UK right to transmission:

Holding back for a cinema release is one thing; waiting for a satellite competitor is another. If we're buying completed feature films, as broadcasters have long done, we'll wait our turn – behind cinema, video, satellite and cable. But not if we're investing in a major commissioned strand like Film on Four.<sup>63</sup>

It was for this reason that in its press publications the Channel began to consistently emphasise the 'première' season repeatedly between 1995 and 1998. The Autumn 1995 season packs announced 'the strongest Film on Four première season in the history of the Channel'<sup>64</sup>, while the 1997 packs introduced viewers to 'an 'exceptionally strong première season'.<sup>65</sup> In doing so, the Channel sought to highlight the exclusivity of these films at a time of competing movie platforms. An analysis of Film on Four's seasons can thus provide an insight into how the Channel's approach to film changed over time, and also into those external factors in the wider broadcasting environment which influenced changes in the Channel's film funding policies throughout the 1990s.

## **Conclusion**

Changes in Channel 4's film policy have been subject to a number of complex external factors, and the Channel's relationship with film has also changed over time as a result of these factors. Film on Four had always served as a beacon of socio-cultural prestige for the Channel, although this was perhaps more prominent in the 1980s when the Channel had a strong experimental element, a firm cultural remit and

was not concerned with the need to be financially self-sufficient. Between 1990 and 1993 we can identify a considerable amount of uncertainty on the part of the Channel regarding its film policy, an uncertainty which was reflective of wider issues at that time – a worldwide recession, the deregulation of broadcasting, increased commercialism and the move towards selling its own advertising. However, the Channel quickly became commercially self-sufficient, and sought to embrace the success of Film on Four following ‘hits’ such as *Shallow Grave* and *Four Weddings and a Funeral*. The Channel sought to promote Film on Four as a prominent part of its identity, but also as an example of how it was continuing to fulfil its public service remit despite accusations of commercialism. At a time when there was significant doubt as to whether the Channel could operate commercially and continue to retain its public service ideals, Film on Four was proof of the Channel’s ongoing commitment to British cinema, and the diversity of the Channel’s film output also meant that it was catering to different tastes and audiences.

This chapter has also sought to illustrate that Film on Four has occupied a strange existence, being essentially a funder/producer of film while operating within a broadcasting environment. Like the BBC, which followed in its wake, Channel 4 was a broadcaster dedicated to funding feature films. However, unlike the BBC, the Channel’s film arm operated relatively autonomously, and worked similarly to a film studio as well as being part of a larger organisation with a strong cultural remit. As a result, Channel 4’s policy towards film was flexible, with Commissioning Editors David Rose and David Aukin afforded a significant amount of freedom to make the kinds of personal and instinctive judgements necessary in film production. The influence of Rose and Aukin on the direction and output of Film on Four was considerable, and this individual creativity must be taken into account in any

discussion of the Channel's film policy. The following chapter will expand upon these ideas to consider how industrial factors have influenced the content and style of the films themselves, whilst also taking into account the aesthetic debates generated by critics and academics around Channel 4's partnership with the British film industry.

## Chapter 2

### Cinema, meet television: issues, trends and debates

#### Introduction

This chapter will explore the historical background to Film on Four and the industrial and aesthetic debates around the partnership between cinema and television. Hannah Andrews, who has written about the history of Film on Four, largely sees the 1980s as the prehistory of PSB filmmaking and argues, erroneously, that Film on Four only became properly established in the early 1990s.<sup>1</sup> However, this chapter will argue that the real prehistory can be seen earlier, in the plays and dramas coming out of BBC Pebble Mill in the 1970s; it was here that David Rose developed an approach to commissioning independent drama on film which later informed his ethos towards Film on Four. The first half of this chapter will consider historical influences on the identity and direction of Film on Four, and will also attempt to engage with debates around the convergence of cinema and television which accompanied the arrival of Channel 4 as a major investor in the British film industry. The second half of this chapter will deal more with the films themselves, and will consider the Channel's influence on British cinema through the narratives and aesthetic styles of the broad canon of films funded through Film on Four, drawing some conclusions regarding whether the partnership between film and television culminated in particular stylistic trends in the British cinema in the 1980s.

#### **'A sense of time and place': David Rose, Pebble Mill and early Films on Four**

Films on Four, particularly in the early 1980s, were often seen as having strong links to the single play, many of which were shot on film in locations around Britain. In

1982, before plans for the theatrical release of Film on Four productions had been fully developed, Jeremy Isaacs even referred to them as such in a publication for Channel 4 viewers:

*Film on Four*, at 9pm on Wednesdays, is a series of single plays filmed for television – and we're very proud of them. After *First Love*, *Remembrance* and *Praying Mantis* you'll realise that each is very different and that each is a real television event.<sup>2</sup>

Isaacs' view was not unusual; in newspapers and trade publications around this time, there was often a stylistic link made between early Films on Four and single plays. However, less commonly noted was the cross-fertilisation of talent and working practices between the BBC and Channel 4 with regard to these early films. As Head of Regional Drama at BBC Pebble Mill (1970-1981), David Rose had produced many of the most innovative plays of the decade before he moved to Channel 4 to become Head of Fiction, and his influence on the development of Film on Four was in part determined by his previous career. At Pebble Mill Rose was given a specific brief to commission work by regional writers and to raise the profile of the regions on mainstream television. The 1950s and 1960s had seen notable productions from the Birmingham Drama Department, but from 1970 it was to gain complete autonomy from London for the first time.<sup>3</sup> Rose's role as producer at Pebble Mill was thus unusual, in that it enabled him to work outside many of the constraints faced by other BBC producers. This was a factor that Rose arguably used to build a creative culture where writers and directors could flourish and where the regions could be represented on film in increasingly innovative ways.

Writers were eager to work at Pebble Mill because they felt that they could achieve something there that they could not elsewhere. For example, David Mercer was able to make a thirty-minute play called *You, Me and Him* (1973) where the id,

ego and superego were all played by one actor, a production which was expensive and involved over 300 manual video edits after every shot.<sup>4</sup> Rose also encouraged David Hare, the playwright and theatre director, to direct as well as write *Licking Hitler* (1978), which is often held up as being one of the most stylistically notable examples of the single play.<sup>5</sup> Some of the work produced at Pebble Mill was experimental; David Rudkin's *Penda's Fen* (1974) was a surprising departure from the strong vein of naturalism which was often seen to dominate the single play. Set in pastoral Three Choirs England, *Penda's Fen* follows the story of a clergyman's son as he has his self-image and all of his value-systems stripped away. In the course of the play he encounters an angel, a demon, the crucified Jesus Christ and Penda, England's last Pagan king. If *My Beautiful Laundrette* has often been described as the 'archetypal Film on Four', writer and director David Hare says that *Penda's Fen* was emblematic of the 'culture' that Rose fostered at Pebble Mill in the 70s:

When I saw *Penda's Fen*, I just couldn't believe it. And that is the whole BBC Birmingham culture right there, which was David Rose letting people do what they wanted and nobody in London knowing what was going on. You know: "The earth splits open? Oh yeah?" There's just no way a London producer and script editor would have been having that. But my God, that film went out at nine-thirty at night on a majority channel, it's incredible ... And how bold to do it!<sup>6</sup>

At Pebble Mill, then, Rose fostered a creative culture and provided a space for innovation, the effects of which can be identified in many of the plays which were produced there.

Rose did not tend to get overly involved in production, preferring instead to allow room for writers (and directors) to explore their own ideas. Encouraging regional talent and representing spaces in interesting and innovative ways was also central to Rose's concerns. However, what followed from Pebble Mill were not

‘tokenistic’ attempts to set plays in the provinces; indeed, rather than asking a writer like David Rudkin to ‘let me have something about Warwickshire’ the point was rather to get writers to ‘mirror some aspect of a community’.<sup>7</sup> The first strand that Rose produced at Pebble Mill was called *Thirty Minute Theatre* (1965-1973) although this title was later changed to *Second City Firsts* (1973-1978) as Rose did not think that television should be called ‘theatre’.<sup>8</sup> It was groundbreaking in many ways, and the first story in this slot, *A Touch of Eastern Promise* (1973) showed Rose’s commitment to regionalism on television. This half-hour drama not only depicted the multi-cultural aspects of Birmingham society, but it was also, very unusually, shot on film on location in order to give a better sense of city life.<sup>9</sup> Though very different from *Penda’s Fen*, the single play *Gangsters* (Philip Martin, 1975), later developed into two series, also seemed to represent an amalgam of the surreal and experimental rooted in a specific culture and sense of place. *Gangsters* challenged conventional forms of television, with plots centring on drug smuggling, prostitution and the exploitation of illegal immigrants. Through location shooting *Gangsters* also managed to successfully capture the atmosphere of city life, a city described by Pebble Mill Script Editor Barry Hanson as ‘massive and sprawling, terse and deadpan ... a city where every race under the sun mingles’, a city where old and modern were juxtaposed, and where ‘you glimpsed in split seconds, beautiful nineteenth-century churches from high, intermeshed junction bridges’.<sup>10</sup> Shooting on location was also made easier by the fact that Pebble Mill contained a film unit on-site, which cut out much of the expense involved.<sup>11</sup>

At Channel 4, Rose’s role as a Commissioning Editor was in many ways similar to the position he had occupied at the BBC. Indeed, he stated that the move to Channel 4 was ‘a smooth transition. It seemed to me [that] it was pretty well

exactly what I was doing in Pebble Mill'.<sup>12</sup> Script editor Peter Ansorge, who had worked with Rose at Pebble Mill, also echoed this view, stating that 'I did not find the way David worked at Film on Four any different to the way in which he worked at Pebble Mill. He gave the producers freedom, autonomy, but he was always there with what he thought about scripts, in the cutting room he was exactly the same.'<sup>13</sup>

One reason for this 'smooth transition' perhaps existed at the level of creative independence. Isaacs had liked what he had seen coming out of Pebble Mill, and trusted Rose to continue this work at Channel 4 in selecting variety and innovation and in supporting new talent. The management structure of the Channel allowed for this to a large extent. For example, a lack of managerial hierarchy meant that Rose was directly responsible to Jeremy Isaacs, while operational issues were overseen by Justin Dukes, contracts by Colin Leventhal and scheduling by Paul Bonner and their respective departments. Commissioning Editors thus enjoyed the space to work with writers and directors, even though the overwhelming numbers of script submissions they received made the workload of Rose and his department somewhat onerous. In stylistic terms, the move was not only a transition for Rose, but, perhaps, a natural progression. At Pebble Mill, Rose had already shown a preference for working with film, and at Channel 4 he would be working almost exclusively in this medium. Moreover, he saw the idea of films for television as the natural outcome of the single play, stating in an interview that many BBC plays 'could well, I think have had a release in the cinema.'<sup>14</sup> Indeed, in 2011 *Penda's Fen* came in at number 76 in a *Time Out* poll of the top 100 British Best British films, suggesting its retrospective status as 'film' rather than 'play', at least among the 150 industry professionals involved in the survey.<sup>15</sup>



The emphasis on space and place in early Films on Four was also evident, and in his early years at the Channel Rose commissioned a significant number of productions which were predominantly shot on location in order to 'display the regions visually in every possible way'.<sup>16</sup> Between 1982 and 1987, 21 out of 66 transmitted Films on Four were filmed on location around Ireland, Scotland, Wales and the regions of England. The settings in these films were a mixture of urban and rural, and as well as being set around the English provinces a considerable number shared locations in Scotland, Ireland and Wales (films like Michael Radford's *Another Time, Another Place* and Karl Francis' *Giro City* [1983]). Critics at the time noted that many Films on Four displayed an acute sense of geography, which, as James Saynor argued, followed a 'formula of socially displaced characters firmly positioned within a regional landscape'; a formula which had 'also characterised the offerings of Rose's writers in the 70s'.<sup>17</sup> Indeed, many of these films can trace their influences to plays by Alan Plater, Ken Loach/Tony Garnett and Mike Leigh, while Rose also continued to work with these writers and directors at Channel 4.

These productions aimed at capturing the identity of regional communities, exploring the relationship between character and landscape and examining the ways in which 'place' can shape individual identity. Indeed, just about the only process for selecting scripts that Rose would admit to in early interviews was that they should 'take strength from a sense of the particular, a sense of time and place'.<sup>18</sup> The comparison between Pebble Mill and early Films on Four may seem like a tenuous one, especially considering that over two thirds of these early films do not fit into this particular mode. But with Rose's emphasis on the regional, his preference for film, and his own methods of working (providing a base of talent, offering creative freedom, acting as a benevolent patron but offering advice and encouragement when

needed) Rose's previous career as Head of English Regions Drama does need to be considered as being extremely influential to the output of Film on Four in the first few years of the Channel's operation.

This section has identified a continuity in working practices between David Rose's time at Pebble Mill and his move to Channel 4. It has also identified a stylistic continuity arising from these practices, as well as noting a cross-fertilisation of talent between these two organisations. However, aside from these direct influences, Films on Four cannot easily be grouped in terms of style or genre. Indeed, many of the early Films on Four were criticised for being a strange breed, with little consistency between them. The filmmaker James Scott commented that 'they could have come from anywhere, even dropped from the moon'. He added, 'they don't relate to very much, and show no awareness of cinema tradition'.<sup>19</sup>

Early Films on Four can be seen as having close links to the television play, but in fact they also draw influences from a variety of sources. Perhaps they 'showed no awareness of cinema tradition' because they were, in fact, something new; films which employed hybridised forms and borrowed a combination of aesthetics drawn from a broad range of filmmaking styles and genres. This idea will be explored further later in this chapter, but first this thesis will turn to look at some of those issues, both practical and aesthetic, which followed in the wake of Channel 4's decision in the early 1980s to fund films for cinema release as well as television broadcast.

### **Theatrical issues**

Prior to the arrival of Channel 4, few television companies were directly involved in film production, though there were some exceptions to this; for example, Peter Hall's

*Akenfield* was produced by LWT and given a cinema release in 1975.<sup>20</sup> But in 1980, no films were produced with television funding. By 1989, broadcasters were investing in 49% of British film productions.<sup>21</sup> While in the USA many film companies had historically cultivated television production interests, in Britain cinema and television had developed separately and companies tended not to collaborate for reasons of historical rivalry (which were reinforced by union practices).<sup>22</sup> The idea that television should support British film production had its genesis in the 1970s. In 1973, the Cinematograph Films Council had argued that a levy should be placed on films shown on television to support the ailing industry. The Terry Report of 1976 also recommended that producers seek better prices for their films from television, and proposed that a levy be placed on the yearly profits of the independent television companies.<sup>23</sup> But it was through the recommendation for the Fourth Channel (the Annan Report) that a partnership between film and television really came to fruition.

As has already been noted in the introduction to this thesis, releasing films in the cinema was not initially the intended goal for Films on Four. As David Rose stated:

No one was discussing theatrical windows of any kind when the early films were commissioned, but of course *Remembrance* and *Angel* were all made six, if not nine, months ahead of our going on air, so the filmmakers naturally began to look for these opportunities and we welcomed that.<sup>24</sup>

The motivation for seeking out theatrical distribution was certainly not commercial, as domestic releases of Films on Four were unlikely to make significant returns for the Channel, and were likely to cost more to make than the average television drama. Indeed, in 1993, the Channel admitted to the Monopolies and Mergers Commission that in ten years, only a handful of Films on Four had actually made a profit.<sup>25</sup>

However, theatrical release did enable the Channel to capitalise on critical attention and the prestige of the premiere. Film investment was also important for raising the international profile of the Channel in a way that television drama could not. By January 1993, the Channel had aired 152 films in the Film on Four slot, more than 60% of which had had theatrical exposure. More than 70% of these productions had also been entered into film festivals around the world.<sup>26</sup> And, though these films made very little money, a handful served to boost the Channel's reputation, such as *My Beautiful Laundrette*, *Mona Lisa* (Neil Jordan, 1986), and *Wish You Were Here* (David Leland, 1987).<sup>27</sup>

However, funding films for cinema release could also be extremely problematic, and could provoke tensions between the Channel and filmmakers. For example, in 1984 Derek Jarman's *Caravaggio* was halted because the co-investors wanted to push for a three-year holdback on the film in order to maximise its theatrical potential. The issue for filmmakers and exhibitors was that films needed to have a decent theatrical run before screening on television. However, this created a problem for the Channel, as this meant it would have to potentially wait years to broadcast a film in which it had invested heavily. Furthermore, this could even be detrimental to television ratings, if a number of people had already seen the film in cinemas. Curtailing a theatrical run could also hit small independent cinemas the hardest, particularly at a time when cinemagoing was in decline. Producer Simon Perry stated in an interview regarding the release of *Another Time, Another Place*:

The problem in Britain, basically, is that the release pattern is determined by Channel 4's involvement. We have on the table firm interest for theatrical release and the offer for a video release, but both are predicated on a one-year holdback.<sup>28</sup>

In some cases, the Channel would try to hold back a film from television transmission so that it could enjoy a longer theatrical run. The television broadcasts of *Angel* (Neil Jordan, 1983) and *Moonlighting* (Jerzy Skomilowski, 1983) were delayed in order for the films to receive a longer theatrical window.<sup>29</sup> Schedules could also be arranged in order to pad out the time between Film on Four première seasons. By scheduling seasons of Film on Four International (overseas films to which the Channel had pre-bought television rights) in the gap between Film on Four seasons, the Channel could allow a greater theatrical window to their domestic collaborators.<sup>30</sup>

Though holdbacks on some films were negotiated, the Channel also faced significant problems with the Cinema Exhibitors Association. Independent distributors had no rules regarding the maximum time for theatrical exposure, but larger distributors tended to operate under the CEA, which operated a three-year holdback.<sup>31</sup> For example, though *She'll Be Wearing Pink Pyjamas* received much interest from Rank and EMI, working with these exhibitors would delay television broadcast by three years. The films' producer, Adrian Hughes, summed up the problem: 'We are concerned that C4 gives *Pyjamas* a proper theatrical release. At the same time, why should C4 pay for and commission a really good piece of filmed drama and yet by the time it comes on the box everybody has seen it?'<sup>32</sup> The option for the Channel in this instance was to allow the run to go ahead but appeal against the holdback when its theatrical life was seen to be diminishing.<sup>33</sup>

In some cases a three year television holdback and two year cable holdback was necessary for commercial as well as cultural reasons, as this would allow a film to build up publicity as well as being able to exploit each market in turn.<sup>34</sup> However, in the 1980s Channel 4 films tended to be released on independent circuits and in

West End cinemas, and a film given a limited release on the independent circuit would exhaust its theatrical life fairly quickly. In the case of films like *My Beautiful Laundrette*, *Letter to Brezhnev* and *Wetherby* (David Hare, 1985), though the theatrical life of these films had been exhausted within a few months, the Channel was still obliged to wait three years before screening them on television.<sup>35</sup>

According to the British Screen Advisory Council, 'For a television company, investing in British cinema productions (with outstanding critical success) this was of considerable embarrassment and threatened the collapse of the Film on Four series.'<sup>36</sup> In 1986 the CEA introduced an exemption from this rule for films with budgets under £1.25m, although the Channel's issues in this area would not be ironed out until later, when the CEA's exemption threshold was raised to £4m in 1988. This section has discussed some of the practical issues facing Channel 4 in funding Films on Four for theatrical release, but these issues were not solely practical. The Channel's decision to invest in the British film industry also generated much debate regarding the aesthetic consequences of the involvement of a broadcaster in film production - debates which the following section will reprise.

### **'Too slight for cinema, too slack for television'?**

In many ways, television and cinema had converged decades prior to the arrival of Channel 4. For example, in the late 1950s, the advent of video technology meant that television dramas could be recorded, rather than shot live, which opened up greater possibilities for the medium. Television was also an avid consumer of cinema product, and film began to make up a significant percentage of television schedules; not to mention the fact that, in time, television screens gradually began to get bigger, and cinema screens smaller.<sup>37</sup> There was also a crossover of some personnel (writers, directors and actors) between both media, and this was especially prevalent in

Britain in the 1970s. As film funding became scarcer, directors such as Stephen Frears and Ken Loach preferred to focus their attentions on television, leading to the popular expression 'British cinema is alive and well and living on television'.<sup>38</sup> But in the 1980s this evolved into a direct partnership, as Channel 4 began funding film productions, which in turn influenced ITV and the BBC to cultivate their own film financing activities. This opened up a debate about the implications of this new development for the film industry in Britain, and at the centre of this debate was the issue of whether these productions were films, or simply 'jumped up single plays'. In 1984, Jeremy Isaacs summed up the issue: 'some people argue that films made on this scale are neither one thing nor the other; too slight for the cinema, too slack for television'.<sup>39</sup> While many critics saw the benefit of television funding to an ailing film industry, others questioned what this might mean for the types of production emerging from this partnership. They argued that making films with television money, for screening on television, might lead to a scaling down of the cinematic imagination (and further exacerbate the diversion of talent and resources from independent film production).

This culminated in arguments regarding the essential differences between cinema and television at the level of visual style. Television drama, linked to notions of Public Service Broadcasting (even for commercial broadcasters) has been influenced by theatrical and literary sensibilities, and, according to Martin McCloone, 'naturalism [has been] its defining aesthetic.' He argued that while many of the plays of the 1970's were shot on film, the artistic potential of these productions was never fully realised because of long-held values of British TV drama production which 'failed to see the celluloid through the script.'<sup>40</sup> Indeed, Martin Auty argues that publicists, reviewers and filmmakers were shy of using the

term 'TV movie' to describe Films on Four because of the negative connotations of this term. From the 1960s, the BBC had been producing 'plays' on film, while the Hollywood 'TV movie' was popularly seen as being 'formulaic' and suited only to the small screen.<sup>41</sup> Excessive 'literariness' was an accusation often levelled at British cinema generally, but particularly at Film on Four, which was seen as evolving out of the single play tradition. Directors like Lindsay Anderson worried that the Channel's involvement in British cinema might lead to distinctly 'uncinematic' filmmaking:

I think the real difference is the kind of subject liable to be financed by Channel 4, which leads to some of the new British films being a bit lacking in the ambition one associated with a cinema film. There is a certain restriction of imagination or idea, rather than the feeling that if you make a film financed by television you have to restrict it in terms of technique or style.<sup>42</sup>

There was also the stigma of making a production with television funding, which could make it seem less attractive to distributors and cinemagoers. As a result, in the early days of Film on Four producers and distributors tended to play down the television angle. Nicholas Mellersh of Reddifusion (who partly funded Michael Radford's 1983 film *Another Time, Another Place*) was of the opinion that there should be no mention of Channel 4 involvement when films are being distributed, stating that reviews which proclaimed 'another breakthrough hit for Channel 4' meant that it was 'not surprising that nobody goes to see the film.'<sup>43</sup>

Common arguments, in addition to ideas about aesthetic differences, also related to viewing space and the 'flow' of television. Ken Loach, who was to secure major commissions for the Channel in the early 1990s, saw television as the enemy of film:



It is not the technology of television that is at fault, rather the use that is made of it – it is visual wallpaper, a sort of McDonalds of the mind, which reduces a film enormously and to some extent is extremely destructive because of the fragmented way it is seen.

Chased off the screen by a different set of images and then preceded by another set of images, the film becomes very much diminished as a coherent entity.<sup>44</sup>

Furthermore, a darkened auditorium filled with hundreds of people allowed undivided attention, whereas in a sitting room television had to compete with everyday life, with the remote control allowing the freedom to flick back and forth. This is of course a problem inherent with viewing any film on television, however, and most criticisms directed at Films on Four were less about the obvious differences between television and film and more about how television financing would affect the aesthetics of British film productions. What this essential difference actually *was* was difficult to pinpoint. What constitutes a television film and how does it differ from a 'cinema' film? This question generated vague arguments such as Mamoun Hassan's assertion that 'television is at its best explaining and describing...cinema is at its best when it concerns itself with the ineffable, that which cannot be expressed.'<sup>45</sup> In 1984, Penelope Houston, editor of *Sight and Sound*, wrote 'No one wants to look the Channel 4 gift-horse in the mouth...but...there remains a nagging feeling that what we've got...isn't quite enough: that the movie movie, as opposed to the TV movie, enjoys not only a wider vitality, but the power to probe more deeply.'<sup>46</sup>

There have also been (and continue to be) debates surrounding the long term effects of television funding on the industry. In 1995, David Elstein, Head of Programming for BSKYB, submitted evidence to the National Heritage Committee suggesting that television funding led producers and directors to make films which were less likely to appeal to cinema audiences, stating that 'there is no long term

future in the £1-3m business. That is what has been the bane of the European film industry. It has been locked into the low-budget mode for decades while Hollywood has been sweeping up the pool by reinvesting in the film industry.<sup>47</sup> Of course, underlying all of the above criticisms was the desire for British producers to make films that could compete with the Hollywood studios in domestic and international markets, an idea which has long been suggested in government policy documents relating to the film industry. However, it has been the case that whenever British cinema has tried to make an impact in the US market, the industry has been unable to sustain costly failures because it does not have the infrastructure to engage in filmmaking on this scale.

Rose tended not to distinguish between films for the cinema and films for television. Part of the reluctance to decide what might make a good cinema or television film stemmed from the fact that the Channel so often got it wrong. For example, some films made with the cinema in mind could collapse, while films made purely for television might attract a theatrical release.<sup>48</sup> *My Beautiful Laundrette* (Stephen Frears, 1985) though 'strictly a film for television',<sup>49</sup> became one of the most successful productions Channel 4 financed in the 1980s. The film gained a theatrical run in the UK following favourable reception at the Edinburgh Film and Television Festival, and also managed to secure North American distribution. However, in general, Films on Four were not expected to make any returns in the domestic market, and as a result sales to international markets became an increasingly crucial source of revenue.

As the Channel began to develop strategies for launching films in the international art-house market, Head of Sales Larry Coyne urged filmmakers to 'consider adding those extra features – sound quality, widescreen and camera

movement among them – that will help to make it attractive to the theatrical market.<sup>50</sup> According to Coyne, it took filmmakers and the Channel a few years to realise what might work in the cinema: ‘we are now doing things that we didn’t do three years ago; we shoot on 35mm in a widescreen ratio and we sometimes pay for stereo sound. These things are unimportant if you’re producing a TV film but important if you’re trying to impress a cinema audience.’<sup>51</sup> It is unsurprising that Coyne, who was responsible for selling Films on Four where the Channel owned the rights to do so, would encourage filmmakers to make their productions more appealing to cinemagoers. However, this illustrates that even among Channel 4 personnel, views differed regarding those qualities which made a film ‘cinematic’. This also shows that making films for cinema release (which necessitated being able to secure the interest of distributors) was a learning process for both the Channel and filmmakers.

The aesthetic preoccupation about the difference between films made for television as well as cinema was arguably a British issue, given the close association of Films on Four with the single play, and the strong theatrical and literary tradition evident in British television drama. Elsewhere in Europe, television had been a source of finance for film production for many years, but British cinema could draw upon no such precedent. This became increasingly apparent with the Channel’s involvement in international film festivals. At festivals like Cannes, for example, Films on Four tended not to be viewed as television films. In 1983, David Aukin stated that:

This is a debate you would only have in the UK. In France, Germany, in the US, they don’t know what they’re talking about. Clearly if you don’t have a huge budget you cannot make epic movies, but it’s the grammar of *filmmaking*...In no sense is *Naked* a television film, it is a proper movie, for the big or small screen.

Look at Peter Weir's *Green Card*... If you took away the stars...there is nothing left to say that it's a big film.<sup>52</sup>

Films on Four, then, initially had to contend with a significant amount of historical baggage, influenced by the long history and socially conscious traditions of Public Service Broadcasting. This is further evidenced when we consider the wide variety of films sponsored by the Channel. While realist dramas dealing with contemporary issues like *Giro City* (Karl Francis, 1982) and *The Disappearance of Harry* (Joseph Despins, 1983) seemed to fit firmly into the single play aesthetic, films like *Paris Texas* (Wim Wenders, 1984), *The Company of Wolves* (Neil Jordan, 1984), *Dance with a Stranger* (Mike Newell, 1985) and *The Draughtsman's Contract* (Peter Greenaway, 1982) were undoubtedly 'cinematic'.

The debate around television funding drew out prejudices from all sides, and this prejudice arose partly from unrealistic expectations regarding the kinds of productions that the British film industry should be expected to make, and partly from preconceived associations between Films on Four and the television play. In reality, the canon of Films on Four in this era is too diverse and varied to attempt to apply a blanket 'cinema' or 'television' label. The beginning of this chapter briefly highlighted some ways in which the style of some early Films on Four almost seemed to have emerged from the single play, arguing that some correlation can be made between those plays produced by David Rose at BBC Pebble Mill (at least in terms of a clear regional impetus and a level of continuity in working practices). But what were some of the other stylistic trends in the British films of the 1980s, and how far can these trends be seen as a result of the involvement of Channel 4 in British film production? The following section will engage with this question.

### **Films on Four and emerging trends in the British cinema of the 1980s**

'What are the emerging themes and styles of the new British cinema?' asked an Italian critic at the Taormina Festival the other week after Mike Radford's *Another Time, Another Place* had become the second British film in successive years to win the festival's top prize. No one knew quite how to answer the question since there seems very little contact between *The Draughtsman's Contract* and *Ascendancy*, or *Angel* and *Local Hero*. Even *Another Time, Another Place* and *Remembrance*, the two Taormina winners, could scarcely be further apart.<sup>53</sup>

The above quote from Derek Malcolm writing in the *Guardian* in 1983 points to how British film critics were attempting to quantify the ways in which British film culture was rapidly changing due to the arrival of Channel 4. It can be argued that the growth of Film on Four in the 1980s coincided with the emergence of new aesthetic trends in British cinema, trends which have been identified elsewhere by Christopher Williams, John Hill and Paul Giles.<sup>54</sup> For example, Williams argues that many Films on Four seemed to merge the 'traditional' social realist aspects of British cinema with the more personal and 'subjective' concerns of European art cinema, spawning a number of productions which fall into the category of what he terms 'Social Art Cinema', an idea which was later expanded upon by Samantha Lay.<sup>55</sup> This idea of European styles merging with British arguably had its industrial determinants in a need for more specialised and international exhibition, as well as Channel 4's increasing involvement in European co-productions throughout the decade. Paul Giles argues that the Channel 4 films of the 1980s 'deal more convincingly with confinement than escape' which shows a certain conservatism more suited to television than cinema. However, Giles also noted the ways in which Films on Four such as *Wish you Were Here* and *The Ploughman's Lunch* (Richard Eyre, 1984) offered intelligent, self-conscious critiques of the past. This can be seen as part of a wider trend in the 1980s towards self-reflexive, personal histories, a feature noted briefly by Amy Sargeant.<sup>56</sup> This section will deal with some of these

ideas, questioning how far these emerging styles can be seen as being, in some ways, a result of the involvement of Channel 4 in the film culture of this period.

### *Space, place and the regional*

As noted earlier in this chapter, 21 out of 66 transmitted Films on Four between 1982 and 1987 were filmed on location around Britain and dealt with particularly regional concerns, be it the protagonist's relationship with landscape, modernisation, unemployment or the political situation in Ireland. One of the most identifiable aspects of the first commissioned Films on Four were those films set in rural areas, and this constitutes ten of these twenty-one films. In many of these productions, the central characters seem firmly bonded to the landscape and indeed the landscape almost seems to play a major character. Michael Radford's *Another Time, Another Place*, and Bill Bryden's *Ill Fares the Land* (1983), are typical of this category. Six of these films are set in regional urban centres and dealt with themes such as poverty, confinement, and urban depression, and tend to include plucky characters set against a grey and miserable working-class England. These films have been seen to draw their influences directly from the New Wave films of the 1959-1963. Films such as Chris Bernard's *Letter to Brezhnev* and Alan Clarke's *Rita, Sue and Bob, Too* are good examples.

Despite Rose's professed dislike of adaptations and of Second World War films, there were no hard and fast rules at Film on Four<sup>57</sup>, and indeed Michael Radford's *Another Time, Another Place* became a personal favourite of Rose's because 'it did what we were trying to do in Birmingham' in creating an authentic view of a particular community.<sup>58</sup> Based on a semi-autobiographical novel by Jessie Kesson, *Another Time* is set on the Black Isle, just north of Inverness, and follows

the story of Janey (Phyllis Logan), who falls in love with one of the Italian prisoners of war stationed in her village during the World War Two. The film was critically acclaimed for its sense of poetic realism and its use of landscape, which seemed to draw upon European rather than British cinematic traditions. In this film, the Isle is all-encompassing and oppressive, and the setting is used to emphasise a sense of stifling claustrophobia which is almost expressionist, reflecting Janey's entrapment in her marriage and her homeland. Numerous landscape shots make the ground and sky seem far too close together. In the words of one reviewer, 'glowering lurid skies [are] hung so low one feels the characters will have to crawl beneath them', which leads to feelings of oppression rather than the sense of freedom associated with wide open spaces.<sup>59</sup> The poignant melancholy of the film lies in the fact that, in spite of her desire to escape, Janey is firmly bonded to the island just as much as her lover is bonded to Naples and rails for the comfort of his homeland. Janey's Italian has shown her that there are other times, and other places, but that she will probably never see them.

Landscape in cinema is never neutral. As Andrew Higson argues, cinematic space 'is always at some level invested with value, meaning, and significance, whether that meaning is generated internally by the interplay of characters, events, and filmic presentation, or extratextually by the connotations those spaces have for audiences'.<sup>60</sup> In many early commissioned Films on Four, rural landscapes often seem to interact with the narrative at some level, sometimes almost functioning as characters in their own right. In Bill Bryden's *Ill Fares the Land* (1983), the landscape acts both a nourishing and constraining force. Filmed in Applecross in Wester-Ross, *Ill Fares the Land* tells the story of the residents of the island of St Kilda in the Outer Hebrides and their tough decision to leave their remote home for

the Scottish mainland. The film portrays a beautiful but untameable landscape of oppositions. Shots of the landscape, of the cliffs of the island jutting into the sky and of waves crashing onto the shore emphasise its rugged beauty, but this is harsh and fickle as much as aesthetically pleasing. In its depiction of the island the film recalls Michael Powell's god-like representation of St Kilda in his 1936 film *The Edge of the World*; in *Ill Fares the Land*, the island gives life but it also takes life away, and this is ultimately why the villagers must leave their perfect society for life on the mainland. Throughout the film, the camera moves with painstaking slowness, drawing the viewer in to the pace of village life and contrasting with the fast-moving lives of those who leave for the mainland to find work. The stark dichotomy between modern culture and the islanders' way of life is shown in detail when tourists visit the island for a taste of genuine rural Scottish culture and end up ransacking it in their enthusiasm, leaving the villagers with a flu virus which their immune systems are ill-equipped to deal with. As the forces of modernity unwittingly obliterate the natural equilibrium of the community, the islanders are unceremoniously ripped out of time and place and led confused and bewildered into a new life to which they cannot adapt.

As Annie Morgan James argues, images of Scotland on film are often associated with rural landscapes and the myths connected to those landscapes,<sup>61</sup> while Ireland is also often portrayed on film as a rural utopia removed from the modern world.<sup>62</sup> Such depictions predominate in early Films on Four. In 1983 Steve McIntyre criticised such representations, arguing that by romanticising an 'apolitical' national identity they served the ideological function of displacing and preventing other representations that might have had some actual political significance.<sup>63</sup> These films may indeed represent a form of escapism from modern life by hankering after a



nostalgic past, but one can also identify in these productions a sort of re-assertion of cultural identity and a reifying of regional 'place' in national cinema. In commissioning these productions Rose arguably brought more subjective regional identities to British cinema and television screens in this era. Indeed, David Robinson argues that one of the most notable aspects of Film on Four was the way that directors were able to 'set out to discover new aspects and landscapes of their own country: films have been made in Wales, Scotland, Ireland, Nottingham and darkest London, E8 as well as W8'.<sup>64</sup> Indeed, this preoccupation with place even caught the attention of American critics. In 1986, a season of early Films on Four was shown on PBS, which included Michael Darlow's *Accounts* and Colin Gregg's *Remembrance*. The *New York Times*' critic John O'Connor noted that 'unlike most American made-for-television movies, which could be taking place in just about any suburban setting across the United States ... their British counterparts are rooted in unmistakably specific locations. From the opening scene, there can be no doubt that *Accounts* is taking place in Scotland.'<sup>65</sup> This suggests that early Film on Four productions held an appeal which was very much rooted in cultural specificity.

#### *History from below?*

Films on Four set in rural Ireland tend to focus predominantly on agrarian and sometimes mythical pasts. Shot on location in one of the Irish 'ghost famine' villages, *The Outcasts* (Robert Wynne-Simmons, 1984) follows the story of Maura, a painfully awkward girl who becomes involved with a strange fiddler whose music causes fear and hallucinations wherever it is heard. Other rural Irish films deal specifically with relationships and personal memory, such as *Summer Lighting* (Paul Joyce, 1984) which is set in County Wicklow just before the potato famine of 1845-52, and based around the reflections of an old man remembering his childhood.

Rather than focusing on larger national histories, many of the rural films commissioned in the early years of Film on Four tend to favour looking to the past in order to explore personal relationships and the ways in which characters interact with 'place' and with landscapes of home. Amy Sargeant argues that the engagement with the past in the cinema of the 1980s was more about 'history from underneath', and that rather than focusing on national leaders and events, these portrayals of history tend to rely on personal memory and how such memories relate to the present-day.<sup>66</sup>

In 1986, Paul Kerr noticed an emerging trend in British cinema in the form of increasing numbers of films dealing not just with personal histories, but histories which tended to focus on 'anti-heroes'. These were not biopics, or national histories, but more a history from the fringes which depicted the upper classes in unflattering terms. Examples include films like *Prick up Your Ears* (Stephen Frears, 1987), *Wish You Were Here, Comrades* (Bill Douglas, 1986), and *Dance With a Stranger*.<sup>67</sup> The success of *Chariots of Fire* (Hugh Hudson, 1981) may have encouraged this trend toward more personal 'forgotten histories', but Kerr also cites institutional grounds:

One [reason] is the increasing interdependence of film and television, an interdependence which inevitably results in a mixture between the two media's most familiar narrative forms: TV naturalism and current affairs formats fusing with cinema's larger than life fictions.<sup>68</sup>

Here it might appear that the convergence of cinema and television led to new cinematic trends, with British cinema engaging with forgotten histories which were intimate and dealt with personal memory in a critical way. With the exception of lavish costume dramas like *A Room With a View* which fetishise a particular view of British history, there is a definite immediacy to many of these Films on Four which encourage the viewer to relate to characters on a personal level but also to engage with the nature of memory and the ways in which the past is constructed. These are

films which, while visually interesting, also seem especially suited to the direct and more intimate nature of television viewing. For example, *Prick up Your Ears*, a film about the relationship between playwright Joe Orton and his lover Kenneth Halliwell, explores the emotional tensions between the couple while at times bordering on melodrama. However, critical distance is encouraged through the film's flashback sequences, alternating between the present (the film is framed by sequences of John Lahr researching the book on which the film is based) and the past, exploring the ways in which the past can be constructed through interviews and eyewitness testimony. The viewer is invited into the action through direct speeches to camera on the part of Halliwell, who complains about his lover and attempts to explain his actions.

Richard Eyre's *The Ploughman's Lunch* is perhaps the best example of this type of production. The title of the film comes from the popular dish, which, as the film suggests, was invented by pub landlords to evoke nostalgic ideas of a national past in order to increase sales of cheese. The entire film is a commentary on the ways in which the past can be fictionalised to serve the agenda of those presently in power. One of the earliest Films on Four, *Squaring the Circle* (Mike Hodges, 1983) even begins with the title card: 'everything you are about to see is true, except for the words and the pictures.'

<sup>69</sup> As Paul Giles argues, *Wish You Were Here* also represents the past from the vantage point of the 1980s, with references to fish and chip stands and photographs of Gracie Fields evoking shared communal memories, but in a way that encourages analysis.<sup>70</sup>

These films are almost hybrids, intimate but dealing with larger themes, evoking nostalgia but encouraging viewer engagement, commenting on national issues but (in many cases) remaining apathetic or apolitical to these

issues. But these films were not produced in a vacuum, and one can note aesthetic influences on these productions beyond the televisual.

### *New Wave influences*

Despite James Scott's claim that Films on Four showed 'no awareness of cinema tradition', early Film on Four productions contained similarities with the location-shot tradition that started with the British New Wave, which originally had its roots within the documentary movement of the 1930s and 1940s, and Free Cinema in the 1950s. The New Wave was the name given to a series of films produced between 1959 and 1963 which were often shot on location in industrial towns in the Midlands or the north of England. Predominantly middle class and hailing from the south, New Wave directors were interested in including representations of the working class beyond London and utilised particular visual styles to portray the regions authentically, styles which became unfairly labelled as 'drab', 'gritty' and 'kitchen sink realism'. The idea of bringing a genuine sense of place to national cinema was therefore not a new one. However, whereas many New Wave directors sought to 'explore the exotic within the national'<sup>71</sup> by focusing on working class regional life as a way of elucidating that culture to an educated southern middle-class, as we have seen, the productions Rose commissioned arguably eschewed the framework of British national identity in favour of regional ones. Although the social context and production processes were vastly different, New Wave influences can be seen both in the location shot dramas and series of Pebble Mill and in the regional films Rose commissioned at Channel 4.

This can particularly be identified in the category of urban, regional Films on Four identified earlier in this chapter, and of these productions Chris Bernard's

*Letter to Brezhnev* in particular would seem to be closest to this tradition. In *Brezhnev* two working-class Liverpudlian girls seek a brief escape from boredom and a lack of opportunity by spending a night on the town with two visiting Russian sailors. The establishing shot of the film marks out the cityscape and gradually zooms in until we find ourselves on a boat with Piotr and Sergie as they stare at the city in anticipation. Shots like these seem to hark back to the so called 'Long Shot of Our Town From That Hill' convention of the New Wave films, which Higson notes often served as a romanticised 'spectacle', creating a 'pleasurable lure' for the viewer.<sup>72</sup> However, in *Brezhnev* this is shown to be self-consciously ironic, as the cultural references that Sergie associates with the Liverpool landscape ('Look! Liverpool! Beatles!') are at odds with the modern culture of Liverpool life. This is not the glamorous world of British pop, but the drab, unglamorous world of the chicken factory and the dole queue. And whereas in the location shot, urban films of the New Wave a sense of community was often based on links of shared employment and location, Hill notes that in *Brezhnev* the decline of the working class is instead associated with unemployment and the collapse of heavy industry.<sup>73</sup> *Letter to Brezhnev* thus harks back to the stylistic tendencies of the New Wave, but also seems to be consciously at odds with that tradition.

The film was originally criticised for its lack of focus on the rich texture of Liverpool street life and the superfluity of its many establishing shots. One reviewer argues that 'the camera could have given us a more penetrating look. There are just too many establishing shots of the city's Victorian skyline, and the one montage of its prime tourist sites feels like a throwaway'.<sup>74</sup> But if the establishing shots do seem throwaway, of real interest here are shots of bleak, run-down council houses, peeling brown wallpaper and the stifling atmosphere of family arguments in tiny flats. Alan

Clarke's *Rita, Sue and Bob Too* also deals with similar themes, with two young Yorkshire girls seeking pleasure and thrills against a depressing urban backdrop. As in *Brezhnev*, the sense of familiarity is repressive and is perhaps best represented when Sue and her boyfriend Aslam endure an uncomfortable family visit in Sue's cramped, grimy flat. In both films we can identify a strong sense of fatalism in relation to regional identity.

Samantha Lay observed of many New Wave films that 'character and place were often linked to explore some aspect of contemporary life'.<sup>75</sup> In both films we can identify a strong sense of fatalism in relation to regional place. Trapped in a depressing community, Rita and Sue embark on an affair with a married man in order to keep the boredom and squalor of daily life at bay, but leaving that community is never even considered. In *Letter to Brezhnev*, Elaine escapes to Russia while Theresa is left at the airport gazing longingly after her. Elaine can leave because she is 'not like other Kirkby girls' with her exotic aspirations, but Theresa is 'a Kirkby girl through and through', and her sense of belonging to that community is so strong that she can never break away. The key difference between these films and the films of the New Wave is that although character and place are strongly linked, in *Brezhnev* and *Rita, Sue*, this link deals more with exploring the ways in which place relates to personal identity than any rallying cry for political change. As Lay observes of *Letter to Brezhnev*, the film is 'about never giving up, but this message is addressed to the individual and therefore not an appeal to the embattled working class people of Liverpool or Britain. *Letter to Brezhnev* is a political film, but on a personal level.'<sup>76</sup> This foregrounding of the personal against a background of wider societal themes is a thread that runs throughout the Films on Four of the 1980s, and particularly in the films discussed in the following section.

### *The new 'Social Art Cinema'*

Channel 4 funded a large percentage of films produced in the 1980s, and the convergence of cinema and television undoubtedly had an effect on the narratives and aesthetic style of British cinema in this era. Channel 4 was responsible for a renaissance in British filmmaking predominantly at the low-budget end of the market, funding films which tended to appeal to the independent circuit in Britain, and, as has been noted, to European art-house markets. In Britain, Channel 4 films arguably existed in the market between large budget studio productions and European art films. Indeed, Larry Coyne believed, after the first few years of Film on Four, that the Channel had begun to produce a certain kind of film, the 'gritty low budget film', which appealed to a gap between the Hollywood and European markets.<sup>77</sup> Historically, this has been symptomatic of low-budget British filmmaking more generally. For example, Christopher Williams has argued that

British cinema is caught between Hollywood and Europe, unconfident of its own identity, unable to commit or develop strongly in either direction. On one side an economically and artistically powerful industry...on the other a number of national cinemas which no longer have strong industrial bases but do in some cases represent perceptible senses of national identity.<sup>78</sup>

Throughout the 1980s Channel 4 was forced to negotiate this space for industrial reasons. A lack of government subsidy and a scarcity of American finance made European co-productions increasingly common, while the US dominance of major distribution circuits in Britain and Europe meant that most Films on Four could only hope to achieve releases on independent circuits. This section will argue that a struggle to achieve US funding and distribution and a growing relationship with Europe arguably led, in many Films on Four, to a fusing of the traditional concerns

of British low-budget filmmaking with the stylistic forms prevalent in European art cinema.

Christopher Williams attempts to categorise the Channel 4 films of the 1980s in terms of theme and visual style. For example, he states that of 138 Films on Four shown in the first ten years of the Channel's operation, seventeen were concerned with political issues (for example, *The Ploughman's Lunch*, and *Cal* [Pat O'Connor, 1984]), sixteen seemed to take over from the serious, socially conscious concerns of the single play (e.g. *The Good Father* [Mike Newell, 1985], *Good and Bad at Games* [Jack Gold, 1983]) nine were concerned with 'observational realism' (e.g. Mike Leigh's *Meantime* [1984]), nine addressed historical topics, and so on. However, Films on Four can be categorised endlessly. To illustrate, many of the regional films concerned with place discussed at the beginning of this chapter are also historical, political, and socially conscious, and many also draw upon realist aesthetics. But Williams does note an interesting trend among the Films on Four of the 1980s, namely, the prevalence of the 'art' film, which constituted thirty-three (or 24%) of the 138 films.<sup>79</sup> Examples include *Angel* (Neil Jordan, 1982), *Caravaggio* (Derek Jarman, 1986), *Distant Voices*, *Still Lives* (Terence Davies, 1988), *Moonlighting* (Jerzy Skomilowsky, 1982), *Letter to Brezhnev* and *My Beautiful Laundrette*. All of these films address concerns evident in the European art film, characterised by Steve Neale as constituting a suppression of action, stress on character and 'a foregrounding of style and authorial enunciation'.<sup>80</sup> The art film deals with issues of identity, foregrounds the personal over the social (and the social world is invariably alienating); it is ambiguous, more interested in character than plot, and often contains a distinctive visual style which may be associated with the authorship of the director.<sup>81</sup>



Williams goes on to argue that these films do not just align themselves stylistically with European art cinema; they also draw upon traditional elements of British cinema in their narratives. The result is blend of realism and social concerns with a foregrounding of character and themes of social alienation. This can be seen in *Letter to Brezhnev*, which combines gritty realism and reflections on working class life in Britain with personal narratives of love and feelings of isolation from family, friends and social institutions. *Angel* deals with a musician's desire to avenge the death of a young girl. His journey across the Irish countryside reveals his descent into madness and invites questions about the nature of violence and the human condition, but is also placed against the background of the Irish troubles. But perhaps *My Beautiful Laundrette* provides the best example of this blend of British social realism with art cinema. As Williams argues, in *Laundrette*:

central questions of sexual identity are mixed with discussions of race, economics and generation difference and... the action constantly swings back and forth between the social and the individual in a manner ...which compels admiration for its vigour and attempt at comprehensiveness.<sup>82</sup>

Hill also noted the rise of a British social art cinema, observing a move among Channel 4-funded films towards a more European style of filmmaking.<sup>83</sup>

This move towards European art cinema correlates with a growing relationship between Britain and Europe in this decade. John Caughie argues that the participation of television in film festivals is a symptom of an emerging 'British art cinema' in the 1970s and 1980s, 'an art cinema, balanced precariously between a European sensibility and the North American market, which is economically dependent on television.'<sup>84</sup> Co-productions were becoming more frequent as government subsidy was scarce and American finance dried up towards the end of the decade. The Channel was also committed to funding international films from an

early stage for the Film on Four International strand, and the Channel also sought co-productions with European companies at festivals like Cannes. Where the Channel had sales rights, the European market was also crucial in making a return on film investments, as most Films on Four had limited art-house releases and could not hope to recoup in the domestic market. In the 1980s, then, a move towards Europe was taking place, industrially and aesthetically. This second half of this chapter has sought to tease out some of the stylistic themes that the partnership between Channel 4 and British film brought to the cinema of the 1980s, but (partly for reasons of space) the aim was not to deal with these themes with any comprehensiveness. Rather, the aim was to advance some ideas about what the involvement of Channel 4 meant for British cinema beyond the purely industrial. However, as this section has noted, these visual styles in Films on Four also had their roots in industrial developments, and this chapter has attempted to situate these films firmly within this context.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has looked at some the effects immediately following the Channel's decision to fund feature films for cinema release and television broadcast in the early 1980s. As we have seen, this involvement gave rise to numerous concerns, from practical issues relating to the logistics of a broadcaster producing films for release in cinemas, to the debates generated around this convergence at the level of visual style. The conversation in the 1980s about the aesthetic effects (positive or negative) of television's involvement in cinema is included here because it has been (and continues to be) a defining feature of historical arguments about Channel 4's impact on British cinema. This chapter has also looked at the films themselves, marrying textual analysis with an examination of underlying industrial processes in order to

discuss Channel 4's aesthetic influence on the British cinema of the 1980s. For example, this chapter has argued that the reasons behind the strong regional impetus in early Films on Four can be found in the professional background and working practices of Commissioning Editor David Rose, while the European influences in Films on Four noted by scholars like Williams and Lay can be traced to increased industrial partnerships with Europe in this decade. Of course, any analysis of these trends cannot be exhaustive, as this thesis is predominantly an historical production study of Film on Four. However, as the conclusion to this thesis will argue, this is an area in which future research could be fruitful. Issues of production will form the basis of the following chapter, which will look at Channel 4's impact on the British film industry through a series of case studies of Channel 4's relationships with particular film companies.

## **Part Two**

### **Industry and Working Practices**

## Chapter 3

### Supporting independent production in Britain

*The cinema as a film industry needs television. There is hardly one film a year that's made without television money in the industry at large, and most of the films are made very much with Channel 4...The film industry needs television and we need the film industry. We both need films but it's really within the common grasp. It's a partnership.* - David Rose<sup>1</sup>

#### **Introduction**

This chapter will examine the ways in which Channel 4's film sponsorship practices provided a boost to the independent sector throughout the 1980s and 1990s. It will focus on the Channel's relationship with independent producers, while also discussing the various types of funding deals that the Channel offered. This chapter will offer case studies of three companies in order to assess the Channel's impact on the industry as a whole. The first case study will focus on a small independent company, Partners in Production, as a means of examining the types of funding Film on Four offered to the independent sector and how independent filmmakers flourished as a result of the Channel's sponsorship. Channel 4 also offered consistent funding and support to many companies which went on to become extremely successful, and this chapter will offer a case study of Working Title in order to discuss the ways in which Channel 4's continued support of independent companies benefitted the industry. This chapter will also offer a study of Palace Pictures, a production company which operated between 1980 and 1992, as a means of examining the creative and editorial relationships between the Channel and the producers they funded. The ultimate aim of this chapter will be to assess the ways in which the Channel's funding practices changed the landscape of the British film

industry and in some cases led to the growth, successes and failures of small, medium and large production companies alike.

### **Overview: Channel 4's position in the British film industry**

Very few opportunities were available to both new and experienced producers in the 1980s. In the early part of the decade, the industry had experienced a boost, with *Ghandi* (Richard Attenborough) and *Chariots of Fire* (Hugh Hudson) receiving Academy Awards in 1982, and Channel 4 and Palace Pictures moving into production. However, by the mid-1980s, this had reversed with the collapse of Goldcrest, the removal of capital allowances, the abolition of the Eady Levy in 1985 and the introduction of a Withholding Tax on foreign performers working in the UK in 1987.<sup>2</sup> By 1990, the film industry had reached a crisis. Overall investment in film declined from £275 million in 1984 to 137 million by 1990. American investment had decreased from £176 million in 1986 to just £67 million by 1988, while 1990 saw the lowest number of films produced in the UK since 1981.<sup>3</sup> At the same time, cinema audiences had increased to record levels with the arrival of multiplexes, but cinemagoers were going to see American, not British, films.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, it became increasingly difficult for new writers, directors and producers to break into the industry. Production costs rose, there was little funding available and few sources of government support or tax incentives, and these problems were taking place against the backdrop of a general worldwide recession. By the late 1990s, filmmakers were facing a new set of problems. With the Labour government's support for culture and the arts in Britain and an injection of £100 million from the proceeds of the National Lottery, production rose to almost unprecedented heights, and more first-time filmmakers

were making debut features than ever before. However, few producers made money on their first films, and it was difficult to raise development money for second features. Production rose, but the old problems associated with distribution remained. The advent of lottery funding in 1995 led to a spike in production (at its peak, 128 films were produced in 1996) but many of these films did not find distribution. In the 1990s, of the 966 films that the British Film Institute identifies as being British, 317 were never released.<sup>4</sup> This had not changed by the latter part of the decade. In 1997, Labour announced a strategy to assist in the development of the industry, and commissioned The Film Policy Group to propose a number of structural and economic measures to implement this. The group found that the main problem with the industry was that it continued to be fragmented and production-led.<sup>5</sup>

**Table 3.1:** British films produced 1980-1999

<b>Year</b>	<b>Films produced</b>	<b>Channel 4 productions</b>	<b>Year</b>	<b>Films produced</b>	<b>Channel 4 productions</b>
1980	58	-	1990	51	15
1981	40	-	1991	59	23
1982	67	14	1992	47	17
1983	37	18	1993	67	12
1984	70	16	1994	84	15
1985	58	22	1995	78	19
1986	56	11	1996	128	14
1987	72	21	1997	116	18
1988	60	23	1998	88	16

1989	45	12	1999	100	33
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(Sources: BFI, John Pym, *Film on Four: A Survey*, [London: BFI, 1992], *Screen Finance*)

Table 3.1 outlines the number of films produced in the UK by British companies, or British companies working with foreign co-producers, and is based on BFI categorisations for films made in the UK. However, these figures need to be qualified since, though Channel 4 funded a large percentage of these films, this was towards the lower budget end of the market (up to £2.5m). However, it can be said that during a time of industrial decline, low-budget films made up a large percentage of UK film production.

Many filmmakers did not have access to distribution, and certainly not on the major circuits, as these were largely dominated by the US majors. Furthermore, there was also the longstanding problem of the gap between production and distribution; American studios controlled major distribution circuits, and it was extremely difficult to achieve a wide release with independent exhibitors, which meant that many films went into production without the guarantee of UK distribution. The industry was unsustainable, particularly for smaller companies which came into existence for the life of a film and then disbanded when the production was finished.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, in the 1980s, 454 films were produced by 342 companies.<sup>7</sup> This was also reflected in the output of British cinema in this era. As Sarah Street stated, ‘companies come and go, and with them ideas and styles which, in a more stable economic environment, might have been developed in subsequent films.’<sup>8</sup>

For an independent producer without the support of a major studio, finding finance in the UK was also an extremely difficult and complex process. Producers might receive equity investment (i.e. money the investors could expect to recoup through profit) from one or more sources (for example, in the case of *The Crying*



*Game*, this was Channel 4 and British Screen). Producers would then try to offset more of the budget by selling distribution rights to foreign territories such as Europe and North America, while they could also potentially sell the rights to broadcast the film on television for a further 10%-20% of the budget. The funding process itself was very complicated. The producer had to marshal funds from a variety of disparate sources as there was very little available, and this funding was almost always linked to European sources and North American distribution rights. Indeed, the producer became central to the film funding process for this reason. Producers worked tirelessly to provide the creative space for a production, attempting to draw together complex contracts in a way that would placate the interests of all investors. The producer was therefore crucial to the success of the film.

Producers could secure funding through five main avenues. Perhaps the most common method of financing was to seek funding from broadcasters such as Channel 4 or the BBC. Broadcasters would seldom fund a film fully, so this finance was usually used in conjunction with backing from a variety of sources. For example, filmmakers could apply for funding through government initiatives (The Arts Council of Great Britain, Regional Arts Associations, The Scottish Arts Council, The Scottish Film Council, The Welsh Arts Council, The Welsh Films Board, The National Film Development Fund, British Screen and The National Film Development Fund). However, many of these associations asked for submissions by artists or concerning the arts, and the National Film Boards tended to stipulate residency in their specific regions as a condition for funding. Aside from British Screen (a semi-commercial state subsidiary which received £1.5m per year) state funding for producers was extremely limited.<sup>9</sup> Producers could also seek sponsorship from the BFI Production Board, which could grant up to £300,000 for low-budget,

non-commercial features. The BFI had a firm cultural policy to support artists, and throughout the 1980s and 1990s they supported filmmakers such as Peter Greenaway, Derek Jarman and Terence Davies. Bank finance or commercial finance from city institutions was also an option (though a rarity at a time when the industry was in decline). More commonly, producers would 'pre-sell' the territorial rights of their films to distributors, obtaining an agreement for the distributors to pay out on completion of the film. This could then be taken to a bank to obtain a loan against the guarantee. Producers could also seek co-production partners such through other independent film companies (such as Rediffusion Films).

Amid these disparate funding forms, Channel 4 was able to offer substantial support to filmmakers; support which was, crucially, not predicated on artistic, stylistic or residential conditions. In theory, the only concerns faced by filmmakers when working with the Channel related to budgetary limitations and the personal taste of the Commissioning Editors. Channel 4 tended to offer three main types of financial deal to independent producers. On rare occasions, the Channel would fully fund a production (in 1984, this could be anywhere up to around £500,000, rising to around £1.8 million in 1997). This was the case with Stephen Frears' *My Beautiful Laundrette* and Danny Boyle's *Trainspotting*. The Channel could also (more commonly) enter into co-production deals with other producers. In this case they would usually offer equity investment in the production, as well as buying the television rights to broadcast the film (at a cost of around £300,000). This was the method of financing employed with *The Crying Game*, *Four Weddings and a Funeral* and *The Neon Bible* (Terence Davies, 1995). Lastly, the Channel could simply pre-buy the television rights to a production, offering no equity investment but gaining the right to broadcast it a number of times.

Buying television rights while a film was still in production meant that the Channel was still investing in the film (it was thus 'Channel 4-funded' and could be referred to as such), and this also meant that the Channel owned the sole rights to the UK television première. This type of funding can be seen in *A Room With A View*, *Mona Lisa* (Neil Jordan, 1986) and *Elizabeth* (Shekhar Kapur, 1998). In this way, the Channel could provide money for larger-budget productions and screen them on television with little risk involved.<sup>10</sup> However, Channel 4 also blurred the lines between co-financing and television rights, as the Drama Department would sometimes still seek creative and editorial input on productions where they had no investment but had simply bought the right to broadcast. They could also offer further money on an ad-hoc basis throughout the course of a production, to plug gaps in City financing.<sup>11</sup> Thus, while the funding packages outlined above were the general rule, the Channel was also able to operate with a certain amount of flexibility.

These funding packages remained largely the same throughout the life of Film on Four. However, whereas David Rose would fund around twenty films per year, David Aukin preferred to put more money into fewer films (around twelve to fifteen per year). For Aukin, a fewer number of films on Film on Four's yearly slate meant that the Channel could secure larger equity investments in bigger-budget co-productions. This involved taking more risk, but it also meant that the Channel would be in a position to better recoup its investment and would also gain greater creative and editorial input. According to Aukin: 'there is an optimum number of films we can get involved in editorially. The answer is not to make lots more pictures. We will take more TV rights in more films and over time commission more and take more rights, in order to increase our percentage of involvement in films.'<sup>12</sup>

Aukin's department continued to buy television rights, and also to fully fund those productions that were considered to be less-than-commercial (such as the films of Ken Loach and Mike Leigh). However, fully-funded productions became rarer after the mid-1980s as production costs rose considerably.

**Figure 3.1:** Film on Four funding deals



From left to right: *My Beautiful Laundrette* (Stephen Frears, 1985) produced by Working Title, fully funded by Channel 4, budget £650,000 (100%); *The Neon Bible* (Terence Davies, 1995), produced by Scala, co-financed by Channel 4 and British Screen, budget 2.75m, of which Channel 4 provided £890,000 equity investment and £500,000 television licence (50%); *Elizabeth* (Shekhar Kapur, 1998) produced by Working Title/Polygram, budget 14.7m, Channel 4 bought Pay-TV rights for 1m (7%).

(Sources: John Pym, *Film on Four: A Survey*, Channel 4 Archive)

Generally speaking, there were roughly three different types of independent company supplying a variety of programming (not just feature films) to Channel 4 throughout the 1980s and early 1990s: small companies with a turnover of under £500,000 per year (the so-called 'man, dog and answerphone'); medium sized companies with a turnover of up to £2 million; and large, fully capitalized companies like Carlton and Zenith, which differed little in structure and profit from the main

ITV companies, aside from the right to broadcast terrestrially.<sup>13</sup> In terms of film production companies, these varied from the small companies set up to make one film; the medium sized companies which had achieved a significant catalogue films but which could go bust at any time with just one flop (much like Working Title throughout the 1980s); and the larger companies with varied commercial interests and/or longstanding deals with American studios (this could describe what Working Title eventually became, or how Palace Pictures stood financially in the late 1980s). The following case studies will examine the Channel's relationship with small, medium and large film production companies respectively, in order to offer insights into particular moments in the history of British cinema, and also to look in detail at how the Channel worked with different types of producers. The following section in particular will deal with an important point in British film and television history - the creation of the independent sector and the arrival of Channel 4 - and will discuss what this new opportunity meant to filmmakers working in the industry.

### **‘Independents struggle’? Partners in Production and the independent sector**

This case study of the small independent company Partners in Production (responsible for the early Film on Four *Accounts* [Michael Darlow, 1982]), will be set against the background of the burgeoning independent sector in the early 1980s. This study will look at how low-budget films produced by small independents were commissioned and funded, as well as examining the ways in which the Channel was able (or in some cases, unable) to offer a creative outlet for burgeoning filmmakers. Within the wider context this study will also examine what Film on Four meant for the industry, and how small independent producers responded to this new low-budget model of British filmmaking.

The arrival of Channel 4 in 1982 effectively created the independent sector. In the 1970s, during the campaign for the Fourth Channel, groups such as The Association of Independent Producers (AIP) had utilized Thatcherite rhetoric, laying less emphasis on ideological concerns and instead painting the independents as small businessmen struggling to break free of the monolithic duopoly of the BBC and ITV in the name of free-market competition.<sup>14</sup> It was a campaign which worked well. In his speech at the Edinburgh Film Festival in 1979, Jeremy Isaacs had proposed that Independents should form 10% of the Channel's broadcasting output. However, by the time the Channel went on air, independents had come to supply around 50% of the Channel's programming (the other 50% being provided by the ITV companies and American imports). This was a significant victory, as, in 1979, independent producers had formed just 1% of broadcasting output.<sup>15</sup> Sylvia Harvey argues that the 1980s were marked by a tension between the old and new right; one stood for heritage and the preservation of old traditions, and the other for trade and free market enterprise. This tension is especially evident in the 1980 Broadcasting Act which created Channel 4. The remit to 'innovate' hailed from longstanding public service traditions, while the idea of the 'publishing house' created a highly competitive market where freelancing and impermanent employment was the norm.<sup>16</sup>

Within a few years, over 1000 independent companies had sprung up to provide programming for the Channel. By the late 1980s and early 1990s, independents were also providing programming for the ITV and the BBC following the 25% rule proposed by Professor Peacock in 1986, which stipulated that both broadcasters must outsource 25% of their airtime to independent producers by 1992.<sup>17</sup> While the BBC and ITV still employed staff, many new small, medium and larger companies were created, with many brought into existence for the purposes of

just one production.<sup>18</sup> Jeremy Isaacs and the Channel's Managing Director Justin Dukes had wanted to create a sector that had a limited ability to grow, which would in theory ensure that the Channel did not become too reliant on a few large companies (which might begin to work against the Channel's interests).<sup>19</sup> However, there were significant problems with this model. The independent sector was highly competitive, with a large number of companies producing programmes but not necessarily receiving repeat commissions, as the Channel was under no obligation to work with such companies again.<sup>20</sup> The sector was heavily dependent on the Channel, and many small companies struggled to survive as a result.<sup>21</sup> Many programme makers also saw the competitive nature of this free-market model as exploitative, as there is a tendency for any free-market to become dominated by large companies, which push out the smaller, less efficient companies.<sup>22</sup> However, Martin Auty argues that, although not without its problems, the Channel ultimately worked to the benefit of programme makers working in the independent sector, a sector which was

once a wilderness of grant-aided filmmakers, [and] is now a flourishing garden, ploughed and tended by producers who either dropped out of establishment TV to find greater freedom of expression, or dragged themselves belatedly out of the dwindling counter-culture to make mainstream programmes for mass audiences.<sup>23</sup>

The publishing ethos of Channel 4 meant that over 4000 jobs were created in London alone, heralding a massive boost in employment and opportunities for previously marginalised programme makers to be heard.<sup>24</sup>

With the Film on Four strand, the Channel offered opportunities to independent filmmakers to produce low-budget films in an environment which prioritised creative freedom and cultural imperatives over profit. David Rose sought

to provide a training ground for new talent, while many first-time writers and directors would also benefit from the kudos associated with working on films for theatrical release. In its early days, many producers found an atmosphere at the Channel that was conducive to creativity with few editorial impositions. However, the relationship between the Fiction department and independent filmmakers was also fraught with tension as the Channel struggled to find its feet with the commissioning process. Some producers argued that they suffered incompetence, broken deals and mismanagement at the hands of Commissioning Editors, many of whom had little experience working in the film industry (for example, David Rose had come from a television background, while script editors Karin Bamborough and Walter Donohue had come from theatre backgrounds).<sup>25</sup> As a result, the Association of Independent Producers accused the administrative systems of being 'weak'.<sup>26</sup> John Ellis, who produced *Visions* for the Channel, a series of 15 programmes about world cinema, talks about how the relationship between the Channel and independents changed in 1983 following the first round of commissions:

The Channel came to negotiate the second phase of its relationship with the companies that it had brought into being. At this point, the implicit model altered. Instead of the arts funding body and client relationship, there emerged the more traditional relationship between the freelance employee and the institutional employer. Companies were kept waiting until the last possible moment for news about whether their commission would be renewed; renewals were for six or seven months rather than for a year; competition for some commissions emerged between both new and established groups; and some of the production companies were brought up against their nature as capitalist enterprises rather than as collective endeavours.<sup>27</sup>

Producers also complained about access to Commissioning Editors, arguing that it took months for them to receive a decision on their submissions, while all the while they suspended projects just in case the Channel gave them the green light. They also argued that their scripts were not evaluated properly because of the sheer volume of



submissions, lack of staff to deal with them and little criteria to judge them on.<sup>28</sup>

Issues arose regarding how thorough the evaluating process was for filmmakers submitting scripts without the backing of a major company. Theoretically anyone could submit a script, though this was not always the case. First-time producers were often infuriated by dismissals or advice that they should take their proposals to larger production companies and approach the Channel that way.<sup>29</sup>

Simon Perry, producer of the critically acclaimed Film on Four *Another Time, Another Place* (Michael Radford, 1983), saw this first year as a learning process for both the independents and Commissioning Editors, concluding that both filmmakers and Channel 4 learned much from the experience, as well as having to adjust their expectations respectively: 'Some film-makers have been expecting Channel 4 to behave like a milk cow, doling out funds like a grant-aiding body, rather than seeing it for what it is – a professional, commercially minded enterprise. Channel 4 remains the best thing that has happened to the British film industry.'<sup>30</sup>

During this period, the Channel was acquainting itself with the independent sector - those commissioning programmes had never had to deal with producers before, and the administrative structures in place were fairly new and untested.<sup>31</sup> But despite these initial problems, in 1984 David Rose stated that 'the independent sector is alive and kicking and the submissions are likewise. It's almost a miracle, the things we've achieved over the last eighteen months.'<sup>32</sup>

Through Film on Four, many the small independents hoping to produce programming for the Channel gained the opportunity to move into feature film production. Partners in Production was a small company which also functioned as a collective in which the members were all equal shareholders. It comprised 36 writers, directors and technicians who also simultaneously freelanced for other

companies. Tom Sachs, producer of *Accounts*, stated that this was because the company wanted to avoid becoming too dependent on Channel 4 for finance, and was looking into other sources of finance for project in addition to the Channel.<sup>33</sup>

The group was thus set up to offer its practitioners work yet maintain their independence to work elsewhere.<sup>34</sup> *Accounts* was fully funded by Channel 4 and was commissioned in the first batch of Films on Four. Originally a stage play, the author Michael Wilcox, a member of the company, developed the script with Channel 4 after being approached by Walter Donohue, who had suggested to David Rose that the play be made into a film.

*Accounts* follows the story of Mary Mawson, a widow who moves with her two sons to Northumbria to manage a farm after the death of her husband. The film is a celebration of regionalism, and gives an extremely realistic portrayal of the day to day trials of running a farm, while also engaging with controversial issues when Mary's youngest son is revealed to be homosexual. The film itself stands as an example of the experimental nature of the early days of Channel 4. John J. O'Connor of the *New York Times* stated that *Accounts* provided an 'almost cinema verite [sic] glimpse of day-to-day life in a contemporary rural setting'.<sup>35</sup> Director Michael Darlow was aiming for a naturalist aesthetic, using first time actors and allowing them time to get used to farming processes well in advance of filming. The narrative is by no means fast-paced, and the film makes few concessions to the narrative conventions of cinema. In his 1991 filmography of Channel 4 films John Pym describes *Accounts* as 'a small film, happily embracing its regionalism.' Life on the Mawson farm simply unfolds almost as though the viewer were a fly on the wall, at times to uncomfortable effect, as it almost feels as though the viewer is intruding into the Mawson's domestic life and personal dramas. Location shots are used to

excellent effect, consistently evoking a deep connection between the family and the landscape they inhabit. This is juxtaposed with cramped, domestic setting of the Mawson's living room, culminating in a deeply intimate and personal film. *Accounts* was to be released in a cinema in Piccadilly circus, but when the cinema closed down the film was instead broadcast in the first ever Film on Four season. The film was, however, later shown on the American Public Broadcasting Service as part of a retrospective season of Films on Four in 1986.<sup>36</sup>

What was unusual for director Michael Darlow (who had been heavily involved in the campaign for the Fourth Channel) was the amount of technical and creative freedom that the crew enjoyed on the production. The casting and shooting of the film was somewhat unconventional. The crew wanted to cast untrained actors to gain a sense of reality, a creative decision which Channel 4 backed because, according to Darlow, the Channel was very much against using stars in principle.<sup>37</sup>

To further capture an accurate sense of agricultural life, the two boys lived on the farm for three months before shooting, learning the script as well as a variety of farming methods. Furthermore, although David Rose and Walter Donohue were briefed on progress of the production, there were few editorial or creative constraints. There was a cost controller on set who monitored the production, but did not interfere.<sup>38</sup> Darlow, who had worked for years within the company structures of the BBC and ITV, described his experience working on *Accounts* as 'liberating', because although 'it wasn't that one's work with the BBC and Thames weren't good ... it was much more regimented.'<sup>39</sup>

This had much to do with less restrictive practices. Big production companies (with the exception of Goldcrest) were actually unsuited to working with Channel 4, because of their high overheads and restrictive union practices.<sup>40</sup> The Channel

worked best with production companies that could deal with the Channel's weekly system of cost control management.<sup>41</sup> In order to function efficiently the Channel needed a less conventional way of operating, without the interference of unions such as the ACTT. To facilitate this, terms of trade were agreed between the Channel and the Independent Programme Producers Association, a company set up to represent in interests of the new independent companies. As part of these terms, IPPA adopted the Short Films Agreement, which was traditionally used to allow short corporate films to be made with reduced crew and lower budgets.<sup>42</sup> However, the agreement applied only to those films which were fully funded by the Channel; co-productions tended to be governed by their own unique rules.<sup>43</sup>

Methods of funding and rights issues as set out in the Terms of Trade soon became a subject of concern for IPPA. Where the Channel would fully fund a programme, it would allocate producers a production fee in addition to the budget, ensuring that the producers were paid. But the Channel also kept the rights to the programme, and if it made a profit, it would split this 70/30 with the programme makers. However, Michael Darlow argued that although this presented problems for some more commercially minded companies, many producers were unconcerned with the monetary aspects and were enjoying the freedom to make programmes in a way that they never had before:

there was a feeling amongst the more commercial producers that they should have more of it, but then they were more willing to risk more of the money. But to most of us...who were coming in, we just wanted to make the programmes we wanted to make the way we wanted to make them. That's what motivated us... But essentially we were interested in creativity, alternative voices...it wasn't about the commerce.<sup>44</sup>

Indeed, realising that budgets were a concern for the Channel, producers were willing to work for less in the early days because they had an ideological investment in the Channel and wanted to ensure its survival.

Film on Four, operating within Channel's wider remit for 'innovation', offered independents a new outlet for creativity, with fewer ideological, technical and commercial constraints. David Rose believed that his department should be 'supporting films that would never see the light of day in the commercial sector. I don't know whether *The Ploughman's Lunch* or *Another Time, Another Place* would have been supported commercially but we've got to hang on to what we believe to be quality indigenous films – the kind of film that financiers don't jump up and down about.'<sup>45</sup> Indeed, *Accounts* is a good example of the type of film that Rose and his department set out to commission. It was the kind of film which might not have been made without Channel 4 funding, dealing as it did with homosexuality and specificities of British culture. This was something that John O'Connor also noted in his review of the PBS Film on Four season:

The one common denominator of these productions is an unblinking exploration of segments of British society that tend to be neglected in dizzy comedies or costume dramas. They deal with aspects of contemporary Britain not found in the tourist brochures.<sup>46</sup>

Producer Simon Perry also recognised Channel 4's contribution to British film culture through the funding of such productions: 'The mid 1970's were really drab, a real dead zone for movies of a genuinely British character. Now that's changed. The output of modest budget films has improved dramatically, mainly due to Channel

4.'<sup>47</sup> Indeed, the Channel was often the first port of call for new producers seeking co-production finance, and it even served as something of a training ground – with its strict budgets and highly efficient cost control processes, the Channel shaped the

expectations of producers and directors, effectively offering many new filmmakers a useful education in production.<sup>48</sup>

There were those who criticised this method of funding. In 1990 independent producer Don Boyd, a fervent critic of Film on Four, argued that in working with producers the Channel 'served its own needs, to great critical acclaim ... Channel 4 has often thrived at the expense of those who wanted to make films, relying on them to raise money. And there have been no big hits on Film on Four of the scale of *Diva* or *Sex, Lies and Videotape*.'<sup>49</sup> Some producers also found negotiations with the Channel frustrating, but were bound by a lack of choice. Charles Gormley, director of *Living Apart Together* (1983), described his relationship with the Channel as 'slightly uncomfortable... but it's the only partnership available to you unless you can hack it with an American major and that's murder.'<sup>50</sup> Other independents were grateful for a much-needed source of additional finance. For example, Lesli-An Barrett, director of the Channel 4/Cannon funded film *Business as Usual* (1988), stated that without the co-financing support of Channel 4 her film almost certainly would not have been made.<sup>51</sup> Brian Gilbert, director of *Runners* (1983) also argued that the Channel provided some continuity of funding at a time of few opportunities:

At present each film-maker feels like a hitchhiker. Each thinks it's a miracle to get a lift. But in fact, quite a few *are* getting lifts. 'Film on Four' guarantees the opportunity to make films, which is the only way we'll see anything new emerging. But don't start<sup>52</sup> looking for a collective vision at this stage.

The Channel's support also carried a lot of weight with potential co-producers. According to Colin McCabe, once producers had secured Channel 4 backing, it was 'very easy to raise the rest. Often it is just a matter of finding a distributor in the states. Even if the film fails in cinemas he knows he will be able to recover his costs from home box office.'<sup>53</sup>

However, it is important to remember that although the Channel offered some measure of continuity to filmmakers, it did not offer sustainability. It says much about the state of filmmaking in Britain that the entire industry was swayed by this tiny source of finance. In the midst of a period of severe decline, Channel 4 had, unintentionally, come to form the backbone of British filmmaking, and it was this fact that caused Nick Medley to state in 1990 that 'The 1980s effectively saw the film industry starved, beaten senseless and plugged into a life support system called Channel 4.'<sup>54</sup> For many, Channel 4 became the banner of the new film industry,<sup>55</sup> despite the fact that the amount of money that the Channel offered each year (around £6 million in 1982, rising to just £11 million in 1991) was a drop in the ocean. Indeed, though the annual budget of Film on Four went towards funding some twenty films on a yearly basis, in Hollywood this sum would have been the equivalent of one low-budget production. The problem was, of course, a lack of sustainability in the industry - many companies just did not have the finance necessary to develop a 'slate' of films, whereby a few successes could absorb a multitude of failures. Even big companies like Goldcrest had gone bust for this reason.

The advent of the Channel 4, with its limited finances, did little to change this situation. But throughout the 1980s and 1990s, the Channel did provide a much needed source of finance for low-budget features, and in many cases fully funded films which may otherwise have had difficulty in attracting financiers. The Channel also offered co-production finance to producers forced to seek funding from a variety of sources, and indeed, as filmmaking costs rose considerably throughout the decade the co-production became the Channel's most common form of sponsorship. For many producers seeking co-finance, the Channel was often the first port of call, and

the involvement of the Channel in a production could also attract other investors. Importantly, as the case of *Accounts* shows, the Channel also came to offer a cultural outlet for filmmakers- a chance to make films free from commercial constraints, and films which dealt with traditionally non-commercial subjects. As a result, many burgeoning independent companies came to benefit from the Channel's ethos and its sponsorship practices. However, the Channel also worked on a regular basis with bigger, more established companies, as the following case study will demonstrate.

### **Channel 4 and Palace Pictures**

Palace was an independent company with interests not just in film production, but also theatrical and video distribution, post production and exhibition. The company received support from Channel 4 on many of their projects, including *The Company of Wolves*, *Letter to Brezhnev*, *Mona Lisa* and *The Crying Game*. However, with the exception of *The Crying Game*, these productions would arguably have been successful without the Channel's support (though the Channel was instrumental in developing the script for *The Company of Wolves*). Palace presents an interesting study of the Channel's editorial and creative relationship with an independent company which had, in many ways, a self-imposed cultural remit of its own. Through an examination of that relationship, this case study will focus on Film on Four's remit, its editorial decision making processes and its priorities towards the filmmakers it sponsored.

Palace was set up by Nik Powell in the early 1980s following his long career at Virgin with co-partner Richard Branson, and it was Branson's business model that he attempted to emulate when he sold his shares to Virgin in the late 1970's and attempted to set up his own company. Palace began with a video store, and soon



launched its own video label (much in the same way as Virgin had launched their music label following their chain of music stores). Part of Powell's severance deal with Virgin included a stake in the Scala Cinema, as well as ownership of a post production video editing facility, meaning that Palace was able to develop interests in post production and exhibition as well as video distribution.<sup>56</sup> It was during the early days of the company that Powell saw potential in Stephen Woolley, a Palace employee who was then running the Scala, screening programmes of niche, art-house films while managing to turn a decent profit. Woolley's passion for cinema coupled with Powell's financial skills made for a very productive relationship, and Woolley was soon offered a 50% stake in the company. At Woolley's instigation, Palace quickly moved into theatrical as well as video distribution, buying the rights to both Sam Raimi's *Evil Dead* (1981) and Jean-Jacques Beineix's *Diva* (1981). Woolley and Powell added a very personal dimension to film buying, and would fly all over the world to convince producers that they were passionate about their films and would do them justice on the distribution circuit.<sup>57</sup> The company grew steadily until 1983, but soon faced problems as they began to find themselves outbid on distribution deals by richer rivals, and also by smaller companies that sought to emulate their buying practices. The answer for the Palace seemed to lie in production, as the company would then own the rights to the films they produced and could sell their distribution rights abroad as well as building up a library of titles. As a result, Palace had something which was rare among independent companies in the 1980s; the ability to distribute its own productions. By the time the company went bust in 1992, it had produced a total of nineteen films.<sup>58</sup>

Palace moved into production in 1984, and the company's style was very much determined by its already established distribution image. Palace tended to

acquire specialist independent films that would have been difficult to access elsewhere. In production, their scripts tended to deal with controversial themes and taboo issues. They pursued non-naturalism (*The Company of Wolves*, *Dust Devil*) threats to the political establishment (*Scandal* [Michael Caton-Jones, 1989]) and controversial social and sexual themes (*Mona Lisa*, *The Crying Game*). Like Working Title, their films concentrated on local stories, but in a way that tended to appeal to international audiences, and they were one of the only independents that were successfully able to attract both niche and larger cross-over audiences.<sup>59</sup> They gained a reputation in the industry for producing innovative projects and for acquiring and distributing films which gained cult a cult following. Indeed, Palace's distribution arm was also its main strength, and as Phil Wickham argues, many of the films the company released would come to 'define the decade for British cinema.'<sup>60</sup>

However, while their productivity in production and distribution was admired, they frequently drew criticism for their haphazard management style, and many industry figures deeply resented what they saw as the company's 'happy go arrogant' approach.<sup>61</sup> One Palace collaborator stated that 'critics saw Nik and Steve as wide boys who were flogging brown nylon shirts off the back of a truck somewhere in Chapel Street market. They just didn't see them as legitimate traders.'<sup>62</sup> This was an image that Palace both tried to perpetuate and also struggled to overcome.

While Powell was considered to be a 'money man', dealing with all aspects of the business, Woolley was incredibly passionate about cinema, and tended to see himself as a filmmaker rather than a producer, sharing a close creative relationship with directors, particularly Neil Jordan, and continually emphasising the cultural value of the films that he wanted to make. The company distributed 46 films throughout the 1980s and early 1990s, 11 of which were films co-produced or

sponsored by Channel 4. The first Channel 4 film that Palace released theatrically was *Angel*. Woolley first saw the film at Cannes and was so impressed with its poetic visual storytelling that he was determined to acquire it for UK theatrical release, which meant negotiating with the Channel.<sup>63</sup> Channel 4 were initially wary of giving the film a theatrical release as they had it earmarked for television, but without this Palace would be unable to release it on video.<sup>64</sup> After some weeks of negotiation with Larry Coyne of Film Four International, a compromise was reached, and the film was released in the Scala Cinema for two weeks.<sup>65</sup> *Angel*, crucially, also saw the genesis of Stephen Woolley's long creative relationship with writer and director Neil Jordan. The types of films that Channel 4 sponsored were thus of interest to Palace, and though the company did not directly benefit from the Channel's funding practices until the mid-1980s, they did share in some of the Channel's early successes through the distribution side of the company.<sup>66</sup>

Palace's relationship with Channel 4 has been described as 'extraordinarily fruitful' though 'sometimes edgy',<sup>67</sup> and this certainly characterised many of their collaborations. The first film that Channel 4 was to produce with Palace was *The Company of Wolves*. Angela Carter had been commissioned by the Channel to write a thirty minute script based on her short story 'The Company of Wolves', which had been a radio play. Neil Jordan read the script but felt that it needed to be longer. He brought it to the attention of Woolley, who approached David Rose and the National Film Development Fund and managed to raise enough money to turn it into a feature length screenplay.<sup>68</sup> Carter and Jordan fleshed out the script, a gothic fantasy loosely based around the story of Little Red Riding Hood, with most of the narrative taking place within the dream of a young girl just reaching puberty. The script was loaded with potent sexual imagery and special effects which would have been very difficult

to achieve. According to Woolley, when David Rose and Walter Donohue read the finished article, they 'really didn't like it' as it 'all seemed to them to be too bloody and gory.'<sup>69</sup> Woolley felt that the genre elements of the film did not sit well with Rose and Donohue's initial hopes for the project.<sup>70</sup> In the end it was Lew Grade's company ITC which took a chance on the film, although Channel 4 later acquired it for the Film on Four slot, paying around £300,000 for the television rights. At the time of its release the film was not well received, but it soon achieved cult status and became recognized as being a radical and innovative departure for British cinema during an era which dealt predominantly with naturalism and contemporary social concerns.

The first real co-production between Palace and Channel 4 was Chris Bernard's *Letter to Brezhnev*, a socio-political romance set in the drab streets of writer Frank Clarke's home town of Kirkby in Liverpool. Clarke had originally written the film as a play, and had tried for many years to secure funding to develop it into a feature film. After many fruitless attempts, Clarke and Bernard managed to raise £50,000 from local sources to shoot a rough cut of the film, reasoning that they might be able to gain more interest by screening their work to potential financiers.<sup>71</sup>

Eventually, Palace stepped in and brought *Brezhnev* to the attention of Karin Bamborough, offering guaranteed distribution for the film if Channel 4 would provide the extra finance needed to complete it.<sup>72</sup> *Brezhnev* was released to critical acclaim, securing viewing figures of over five million for the Channel. However, despite the success of *Letter to Brezhnev*, the relationship between Channel 4 and Palace continued to be fraught with disagreements.

In essence, this was due to a difference in working practices between Stephen Woolley and David Rose. Rejection was something that Woolley was to

subsequently experience with Channel 4, in the case of *Mona Lisa*. The film was originally inspired by Chris Brown reading an article about a man who was up on charges for GBH, his excuse being that he was trying to protect prostitutes from their pimps. Channel 4 was one of the many companies who rejected the script on the grounds that the use of drugs and prostitutes was too much, though they later bought it for television after it was completed. On broadcast it attracted 7.8 million viewers, a record for the Channel.<sup>73</sup> According to Woolley, the problem was one of delayed commitment:

[Aukin would say] ‘OK I can see that you have got something here and I’ll reluctantly back it, very reluctantly back it.’ And I think that was the thing that we didn’t have with David Rose. David Rose didn’t reluctantly back *Company of the Wolves* and he didn’t reluctantly back *Mona Lisa*, he *belatedly* backed them. Difference. Big difference, when you’re at the sharp end of a movie as a film producer, and you need that money... because you sit there in meetings with loads of lawyers, and they don’t want to hear about what you *think* you’re going to get for the film.<sup>74</sup>

For Woolley, the key difference in terms of working with David Aukin was that, although Aukin tended to become more involved editorially (particularly at the script stage) this involvement culminated in a creative as well as financial investment in a project.

In the case of *Letter to Brezhnev*, Woolley stated that the co-production was ‘one of the best partnerships we ever had’ and that it particularly highlighted the extent to which Channel 4 and Palace ‘were more than well suited to working together.’<sup>75</sup> Indeed, on the surface, Film on Four would seem to share some of Palace's core values, particularly in their commitment to training new talent and their remit to fund innovative productions that might not otherwise attract funding. Furthermore, though David Rose tended not to be prescriptive about what made a good Film on Four, originality and innovation undoubtedly formed part of his

criteria. He stated that scripts should be 'fresh and unfamiliar...I want to be surprised.

I don't want, over the first 10 pages, to feel that I've been there before and that it's

derivative.'<sup>76</sup> When asked if Palace had any specific cultural remit with regard to the

films they produced, Nik Powell stated: 'Not really. We try to develop new talent, and our films as a result tend to be innovative and interesting. But I have to say that

interesting and innovative films tend to score better with the punters as well.'<sup>77</sup>

Despite having no established cultural objectives, Palace had, by the late 1980s,

gained a reputation for supporting new talent and for taking a chance on riskier

subjects than more commercially minded producers were perhaps willing to

engage with. Indeed, Paul Webster, who took over FilmFour in 1998, had gained

much of his experience in film distribution working for Palace in the early 1980s.

However, it is possible to note certain stylistic tendencies in Channel 4 films which might go some way towards explaining this reluctance. For example, Rose

tended to favour naturalism over non-naturalism (partly because of budgetary concerns) and prioritised the contemporary subject over the historical film or

adaptation.<sup>78</sup> According to James Saynor, Rose's 'cinema' prioritised the writer

rather than the director, which was arguably influenced by his time as a producer of single plays and serials at BBC Pebble Mill prior to his move to the Channel.<sup>79</sup>

Conversely, Woolley had always been interested in the visual and the more

aesthetically thrilling aspects of cinema across a wide range of genres and cultures.

Indeed, as we have seen, it was at the introduction of genre elements into the script for *Company of Wolves* that Rose and Donohue had expressed apprehension.

Aside from *Company* and *Mona Lisa*, which are considered part of the Film on Four catalogue by virtue of the fact that Channel 4 pre-purchased the television rights to these productions, genre films that drew upon established American

cinematic styles were fairly uncommon in the Films on Four of the 1980s. Though the films of Peter Greenway, Derek Jarman and Terence Davies were visually experimental and followed non-naturalist aesthetics, these productions tend fit more comfortably into the category of 'art-house' cinema, and were the result of numerous ongoing collaborations between Channel 4 and the BFI throughout this decade. What this highlights is that although Channel 4 was far less restricted than the BBC in terms of production practices and their PSB remit, this nevertheless shows a tension between producers like Powell and Woolley and the stories they wanted to tell, and the interests of a sponsor like Channel 4. In the case of Working Title, the company's creative interests were often closely aligned with those of Film on Four. *My Beautiful Laundrette* came to represent the typical 'Channel 4 production' as much as it did the 'Working Title film'. Working Title also worked well with the Channel financially, and is cited by Paul Bonner and Leslie Aston as being one of the aforementioned production companies which dealt well with Channel 4's financial management processes.<sup>80</sup> Palace, as we shall see, tended to suffer from financial setbacks and mismanagement on many of their productions.

The creative interests of Palace and Channel 4 arguably aligned in 1991 with the production of Richard Stanley's *Dust Devil*. *Dust Devil* is a supernatural fantasy horror about a demonic creature that poses as a hitchhiker and preys on lonely drifters. Set on the arid plains of Namibia, the film follows the story of Wendy, a young woman fleeing her abusive husband. As she drives aimlessly into the desert, she is followed by a mysterious American hitchhiker (the demonic 'Dust Devil') who at times seems more ghost than human. The two begin a relationship which the demon is reluctant to end in his customarily violent way because he finds himself growing attached to his prey. *Dust Devil* is a confusing mix of western and European

styles, aesthetics and genres, drawing many influences from cinema history. For example, the Western is well-represented by the protagonist, who embodies the proverbial ‘man with no name’ – an American cowboy/aimless drifter complete with hat, spurs and vernacular. However, the film also draws upon the horror genre with the use of extreme body horror and violence which in places seems to border on spoof-comedy.

The film was unlike anything that had been commissioned by the Channel in the past, and David Aukin made a conscious decision to co-finance the production for that reason. Although *Dust Devil* only took £30,000 during its only UK cinema run, the film represented, for Aukin at least, something more important. This was a call to the industry that the Channel was now willing to accept a very different kind of script, and that Film on Four could commission genre films that could be populist, entertaining, and target a very different kind of audience. According to Aukin, whether accurate or not there was a perception in the industry that there was a ‘type’ of film that Channel 4 was more likely to accept; specifically, productions that fit into the ‘worthy’ social realist mode. In a recent interview he stated that the commission caused filmmakers to take notice:

I think suddenly the industry said, ‘Fuck, he’s doing *Dust Devil*’. You know, that’s interesting, that’s not something that we would expect Channel 4 to be doing. And it wasn’t a particularly successful film...but nevertheless as a genre [piece] it gave a message out to the industry that I was interested in more than just social realism.<sup>81</sup>

The muddled styles of the film perhaps reflect the confusion and uncertainty of the time, namely, issues about whether the Channel should fund more commercial, populist productions in light of recent industry changes, or whether it should even continue to offer films a theatrical release at all. At this early stage in his role as



Head of Drama, Aukin was an unknown quantity to filmmakers. So, to some extent, was Film on Four, in terms of how well it would perform in the changing commercial market. The old debates about whether Film on Four made cinema films, or simply jumped-up single plays, was also still prevalent in the industry. *Dust Devil* arguably acted as a conscious signpost for a change in the policy and direction of Film on Four.

However, it was Channel 4's commitment to the contemporary and the socially relevant which led Stephen Woolley to think that the Channel would invest in *The Crying Game* without hesitation. *The Crying Game* was originally to be named *The Soldier's Wife*, and was conceived by Jordan and Woolley during their first meeting in 1982. However, productions such as *The Company of Wolves* and *The Miracle* (Neil Jordan, 1991) took precedence, and though Woolley kept promising to find finance for the film, the script remained in development until 1991.<sup>82</sup> The film follows the story of Fergus (Stephen Rea), who is part of an IRA group that captures a black British soldier named Jody. Jody is to be executed, and asks Fergus to seek out his girlfriend Dil after his death. Fergus falls in love with Dil, and although she is later revealed to be a transwoman, Fergus still has feelings for her. When Dil shoots an IRA operative who has tracked Fergus down, Fergus frames himself for the murder and takes the fall. The production history of *The Crying Game* gives a detailed insight into the creative and editorial decision making processes of the Channel from script stage to post production, as well as presenting a useful study of the Channel's financial and cultural priorities regarding its own film sponsorship practices.

David Aukin and Jack Lechner were initially impressed with the screenplay, stating that it was one of the best they had ever read, though they were less

convinced by the ending, which they felt was an anti-climax.<sup>83</sup> They expressed concern that the IRA story drowned the love story, and that Dil's revelation would ultimately turn the film into a 'freak show'.<sup>84</sup> Their reservations were such that, according to Woolley, the film was turned down by the Channel seventeen times. Woolley later admitted that 'It finally got to where I even threatened to immolate myself in the Channel Four foyer.'<sup>85</sup> Indeed, if it were not for his persistence and unwavering belief in the script, the film might never have been made. Woolley had submitted *The Soldier's Wife* to many studios, but it was seen as too controversial. French company Ciby 2000 turned it down because of the sexual element, while Miramax loved it but wanted a woman to be cast in the role of Dil, which Woolley thought would be dishonest.<sup>86</sup> For Woolley, Channel 4 was the likeliest sponsor. He and Jordan submitted redraft after redraft, and though these were received enthusiastically, Aukin felt that the script was just not good enough.<sup>87</sup> In a last desperate bid to achieve funding, Woolley wrote a series of impassioned letters to the Channel, trying to appeal to their sense of cultural provenance:

If there is one shred of doubt that it *may* be a film you will later be proud of then do not pass up this opportunity...This letter is heartfelt and serious and if Palace has attained a clownish veneer it masks its serious and passionate desire to see good work initiated, fulfilled and applauded if appropriate. This desire traverses the world of cinema from *When Harry Met Sally* to *Hairspray*, from *Rhapsody in August* to *Evil Dead* and from *Lenny Henry Live* to *Sid and Nancy*.<sup>88</sup>

Channel 4 finally agreed to fund the film, though the production was beset with financial troubles from the start. This was because Powell and Woolley took the same approach to financing with *The Crying Game* as they had with many other productions, which was to rush into shooting prematurely before all of the financing was completely in place and the production money had been released.

Without support from a Hollywood backer, the budget of *The Crying Game* was £2.3 million, down from £3 million after deferring the producers' fees.<sup>89</sup> Powell had trouble closing the production deals and unlocking finance, as Palace's completion guarantor would not sign off on location shooting in Ireland, which meant the production monies would not be released. This was exacerbated by the fact that Powell was also struggling to release the money for two other Palace productions that were shooting simultaneously, *Dust Devil* and *Waterland* (Stephen Gyllenhaal, 1992).<sup>90</sup> According to Woolley, the company 'begged, stole, and borrowed and I pushed my own credit card to the limit. Without the patience and support of British Screen and Channel 4, the movie would have closed down in a week or two.'<sup>91</sup> Palace's approach to raising finance was notoriously haphazard, and this was something that began to raise tensions within the Channel. When Woolley wrote to Colin Leventhal asking for money to keep the production going, Leventhal replied:

You write such good letters but you know, as well as I do, that *The Soldier's Wife* is the third in a line of films which started with *Dust Devil* and continued with *Waterland* in which the financing arrangements came together in a way which really would not be tolerated in any other business. I will have another look at our contracts on films purchased from Palace, and see what we might do, but frankly it is not going to begin to approach the sort of money you say you need to survive. It seems to me that your company has needed re-financing for some time and I can only hope that the necessary arrangements are completed within days.<sup>92</sup>

Financing was finally unlocked, though as the film was nearing completion Aukin and Lechner were still unsure about the ending. Powell later admitted to shooting an alternative 'happy' ending where the leads escaped to Barbados, simply in order to show the Channel that it wouldn't work.<sup>93</sup> The Channel did indeed agree that the ending was terrible, and gave the producers permission to re-shoot it according to the original script, at the cost of an additional £45,000.<sup>94</sup>

The distribution of *The Crying Game* by Miramax will be explored in greater detail in Chapter 5. However, it is worth noting here that through a combination of shrewd marketing and word of mouth, *The Crying Game* went on to gross around \$65m in America, winning widespread critical acclaim and 6 Academy Award nominations, including Best Film and Best Director. The success of the film came too late for Palace, however; by March 1992, the company was going bust, through what Alexander Walker argues was a combination of 'bad luck, lack of capital, poor management that never really escaped from the "haphazard hippie idealism" that had been its foundation, an absence of ready to hand box office hits and personal hubris.'<sup>95</sup> Palace was also suffering from a spate of overproduction in the late 1980's that it had never fully recovered from. The company finally went into liquidation in August 1992, with its collapse deeply affecting its many creditors. Despite being unable to cash in on their success, *The Crying Game* was, for Woolley at least, lasting proof of the company's service to the industry:

If any film were to encapsulate Palace's commitment to film production and British cinema then it would be *The Crying Game*. It was made against extreme prejudice, without any initial backing from the US and an apparent blindness to the combined track record of both Jordan and myself for producing relatively commercial films for below \$5m...and in the Palace tradition, it tackles race, sexuality and politics within the framework of an accessible mainstream thriller.<sup>96</sup>

The success of the film did also go some way towards ensuring that Powell and Woolley's next company, Scala Productions, got off the ground.<sup>97</sup> With the help of Michael Kuhn, who appreciated the talents of the producers despite the collapse of their company, PFE negotiated a 'first look' deal with Scala in exchange for covering their overheads.<sup>98</sup> Through Scala, Powell and Woolley went on to collaborate with Channel 4 on *Backbeat* (Iain Softley, 1994), *The Neon Bible* (Peter Greenaway, 1995) and *The Hollow Reed* (Angela Pope, 1995). The producers also felt a certain

amount of loyalty towards the Channel, as evidenced by a clash between BskyB and the Channel's interest during the financing of *The Hollow Reed*. Both companies wanted to purchase the television rights to the film, but as Powell stated, 'our [Woolley and Powell's] relationship is firmly with Channel 4 (with whom we have produced over ten films), and there's no way we would jump ship to BskyB for whom we have never produced a film.'<sup>99</sup> Thus, despite a number of creative differences, both Woolley and Powell continued to enjoy a long and productive relationship with the Channel.

This case study has served to foreground Channel 4's relationship with a production company in terms of creative and editorial decision making. It has looked at two companies (Channel 4 and Palace) which had specific cultural objectives as well as distinctive reputations within the industry, and has examined the influence of those factors upon creative and editorial negotiations between those companies. The production of *The Crying Game* in particular provides an illuminating example of the creative issues and negotiations faced by Channel 4 Commissioning Editors and the producers they worked with. The production gives an insight into the cultural motivations of a company like Palace, particularly in terms of the persistence of producer Stephen Woolley in obtaining funding for the film. Given the nature of the industry, long term success stories of British film production companies are perhaps few and far between. However, the next case study will focus on the Channel's relationship with a company with which it enjoyed a productive relationship creatively and financially, as a means of exploring the long-term financial and editorial support the Channel could offer to British producers. This study will also feed into one of the overarching questions of this chapter, which is: what are the conditions which allow some production companies to thrive, while others fail? The

following study will consider the role of Channel 4 in helping to determine those conditions.

### **Working Title Films**

Working Title began as a small independent company which formed in the early 1980s and grew rapidly to become one of the most successful production companies in Britain, bringing considerable economic and critical success to the industry through productions such as *My Beautiful Laundrette*, *Four Weddings and a Funeral* and *Notting Hill* (Roger Michell, 1999). Initially headed by Sarah Radclyffe and Tim Bevan, the company achieved success with its first feature length production, *My Beautiful Laundrette*, which was fully funded by Channel 4. Following the success of the film, the company continued to enter into production partnerships with the Channel throughout the decade. Both Film on Four and Working Title experienced change in the early 1990s, with Channel 4 moving into a more commercial broadcasting environment and Working Title being bought by the film arm of Polygram under Michael Kuhn. These changes heralded fewer partnerships between the two, though *Four Weddings and a Funeral* and *Elizabeth*, both part funded by Channel 4, became instant commercial successes. Tim Bevan cites Channel 4 as one of the companies that have been most supportive of Working Title,<sup>100</sup> and this case study will seek to assess the importance of the Channel to the development of the company in terms of its impact on the British film industry both economically and culturally. This study will also focus on how the relationship between the two companies changed over time while also outlining the ways in which both Channel 4 films and Working Title evolved in response to a changing industry. In 1998 Working Title solidified its relationship with Hollywood following a take-over by Universal, while Film on Four became FilmFour and began to invest in more

ambitious projects under Paul Webster, and it thus seems fitting that this year should serve as the final benchmark for this case study.

Producers Tim Bevan and Sarah Radcliffe came together in 1984 to form pop promo company Aldabra in order to provide the finance for the eventual production of feature films. Pop videos were profitable enterprises for established directors at a time when the industry was in decline, as they would often make around 10% of the budget of the video. This allowed Bevan and Radcliffe to come into contact with directors such as Derek Jarman, Nic Roeg and most importantly Stephen Frears, who first approached Bevan with the script for *My Beautiful Laundrette*.<sup>101</sup> Following the success of *Laundrette*, Working Title eked out meagre living producing films on extremely tight budgets. Many of these productions were made in partnership with Channel 4, such as *Sammy and Rosie get Laid* (Stephen Frears, 1987), *Wish You Were Here* (David Leland, 1987), *A World Apart* (Chris Menges, 1988), *Diamond Skulls* (Nick Broomfield, 1989) *Fools of Fortune* (Pat O Connor, 1990) *Smack and Thistle* (Tunde Ikoli, 1991) and *Dakota Road* (Nick Ward, 1992). None of these films were commercial hits, but due to the strict budgeting of Bevan and Radcliffe they did at least break even or make some profit.

In the early 1990s, music company PolyGram was looking to diversify into film under the direction of Michael Kuhn, and following a chance meeting between Kuhn and Bevan Polygram invested 49% in Working Title in 1989 and eventually bought the company as one of its indie 'labels' in 1992, along with Propaganda Films and Jodie Foster's company Egg Pictures.<sup>102</sup> This restructuring heralded a change for Working Title in terms of its business practices and the nature of the company's output. The changing landscape of British production in the 1980s and the harsh realities of working on low budget features made Bevan and Radcliffe

realise divergent ambitions – Bevan believed that in order to build a successful company productions must have commercial appeal, but for Radclyffe, this change would necessitate compromise, and the creative freedom of working within low budgets was preferable. As Bevan stated in an interview in 1993, ‘this restructuring means that we have made a change in our focus, we have been known more for art house films in the past. Now, with the full-backing of Polygram, we will be pushing for bigger-budget, more commercial fare. Sarah likes the more intimate film.’<sup>103</sup>

When PolyGram took over Working Title, Radclyffe left to form her own company while Eric Fellner, previously of Initial Films, stepped in to replace her as co-partner.<sup>104</sup>

PolyGram Filmed Entertainment (PFE) as the new film arm of PolyGram was named, owned film production companies in much the same way that its parent company Polygram owned music ‘labels’. This was a system that Kuhn had copied from the music industry and which allowed for a great deal of creative autonomy on the part of the ‘labels’ in question.<sup>105</sup> Working Title was initially seen as a ‘crappy arthouse label’ with the real winners seen to be Egg Pictures, although the company soon achieved breakthrough success with *Four Weddings*.<sup>106</sup> Throughout the 1990s Working Title retained around thirty to forty staff and had three main arms: development, business, and physical production, based both in London and Los Angeles. Film production would normally take three forms. The first was third party involvement, in which Working Title would oversee the production and distribution, provide some finance and offer some creative opinion. This very much characterised Working Title’s involvement in the films of the Coen Brothers. The second type was productions in which Working Title had complete creative involvement from script to screen – i.e., books or screenplays bought and then turned into scripts. The third



type would be original ideas or scripts developed by the company. Productions of this kind included *French Kiss* (Lawrence Kasdan, 1995) and *Elizabeth*.<sup>107</sup> Existing within PFE allowed Working Title to take bigger financial risks, while the company also had the advantage of the much sought-after access to American distribution through PFE's US distribution arm, Gramercy Pictures. However, as Bevan points out, despite operating within the studio system the company has always maintained creative autonomy: 'I think there is, in a funny way, a "Working Title movie" and that's got nothing to do with what Michael Khun at Polygram or Stacey Snider at Universal or anyone else has said to us along the way.'<sup>108</sup> Both Bevan and Fellner see themselves as 'creative producers' seeking collaborative relationships between writer, director, and producer and professing that the attribution of authorship to a film under the director has been 'much abused' and 'bad for business'.<sup>109</sup> Working within the studio system has allowed Working Title to become the only company to successfully negotiate production arms in both the UK and the USA. With numerous international successes including *Four Weddings, Bean* (Mel Smith, 1997), *Notting Hill*, and *Bridget Jones' Diary* (Sharon Maguire, 2001), the company collectively generated £1.12 billion between 1992 and 2004.<sup>110</sup>

*My Beautiful Laundrette* is generally acknowledged as the film that gave birth to this production company. Discussing his time on the production, Stephen Frears extends this 'birthing' metaphor:

I feel like a taxi driver who's had a baby born in the back of his cab and had to work as a midwife. Making *My Beautiful Laundrette* was joyful, messy, alive; there was no epidural, no blood-letting, no episiotomy. I had no idea the baby would grow up to be the most successful company in the history of British cinema. What larks!<sup>111</sup>

Karin Bamborough had originally approached Hanif Kureishi to write the script, which was funded through the Film on Four Script Development Fund. Kureishi then posted the script to Stephen Frears, who asked Tim Bevan to produce it while he was working on a music video for Aldabra. Initially, the wait for production would have been around a year, although luckily another film was dropped from Channel 4's slate at this time and *Laundrette* was the ideal choice to replace it.<sup>112</sup> The film was a resounding success, crossing over from television to cinema and securing a distribution deal in the US. The plot centres on Omar, a Pakistani, and Johnny, his working-class school friend and an ex neo-Nazi. The two men become lovers and decide to renovate Omar's uncle's run-down Laundrette using drug money. The plot is interwoven with a myriad of complex relationships, cultures, and politics and was praised for embodying a freshness that was unmarred by issues of morality and political axe-grinding. The film opened to critical success and enjoyed an extended run in many cinemas in the UK, while Screen International called the film a 'runaway arthouse hit' in America, where it grossed \$751,465.<sup>113</sup> The film premiered on Channel 4 in 1987, gaining ratings of 4.3 million on its first run and 3.5 million on its second.<sup>114</sup> Jeremy Isaacs argues that it was the timing of *My Beautiful Laundrette* and the talents which came together on the production that contributed to its success:

*My Beautiful Laundrette* captured a moment in Britain, which is one of those things filmmaking is for. And it gave audiences in the cinema and on television great pleasure, which is the other. To see it on our screen and to know that we had put it there and that millions were now enjoying it was rather satisfying.<sup>115</sup>

Culturally, the film is often cited as pushing forward the boundaries of black and Asian filmmaking in its defiance to portray racial stereotypes, serving as an

inspiration for directors like Isaac Julien, (*Young Soul Rebels*) Gurinder Chadha (*Bhaji on the Beach*) and writers like Ayun Khan Din (*East is East*).<sup>116</sup>

*My Beautiful Laundrette* is often described as being the ‘archetypal Film on Four’, but it could just as easily be described as the ‘archetypal Working Title film’ of this era. Indeed, many of Working Title’s subsequent projects were characterised as ‘socio-economic and political movies with a strong narrative.’<sup>117</sup> A continuing relationship with Channel 4 and writer Kureishi formed the basis of two further collaborations. *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid* (1987) was also funded by Channel 4 and relatively well received, although it did not garner positive critical responses on the same level as *Laundrette*. However, it shared many similar themes and characters: Rafi, a beguiling, warm hearted but morally suspect middle-eastern patriarch (Sammy’s father), two central characters in a love relationship, a political background that drew heavily upon aspects of contemporary ethnic life in London and a cynical analysis of middle class-liberalism. However, the formula was too carnival-esque for many reviewers, and Leonard Quart characterised it as being a ‘work of excess, both in its form and content...a bouncy, vibrant film too crammed with themes, characters and cuts.’<sup>118</sup> Hanif Kureishi made his directorial debut in *London Kills Me* (1991) which follows the story of Clint, a member of a drug dealing posse who decides to go straight and is offered a job by a restaurant manager on the condition that he finds a decent pair of shoes. The film again focuses on similar issues, although it was critically panned for betraying a distinct lack of tension and poor character development.

Between 1989 and 1992, PolyGram owned 49% of Working Title, and many of the Channel 4 funded films produced in this period were designed to test the relationship between Working Title and PFE.<sup>119</sup> Films such as *Diamond Skulls*,

*Fools of Fortune* (Pat O'Connor, 1990), *Smack and Thistle* and *Dakota Road* were low-budget features compared to later Working Title productions, and Kuhn dismisses these films as 'a slew of bad and unsuccessful movies' made at a time when Working Title was trying to get a decent development slate on track in anticipation of the move to Polygram.<sup>120</sup> However, these early Channel 4 partnerships had arguably contributed towards provided Working Title with a reputation for reliability, a factor that Tim Bevan credits with influencing bigger companies to place within him a certain amount of trust. By 1994, Working Title had produced twenty films (nine of which were funded by Channel 4) marking Bevan and Fellner out as an experienced producers. Many of the early Channel 4/Working Title partnerships were thus important to the future development of the company, as was the success of a hit like *My Beautiful Laundrette*. According to Tim Bevan:

[Film on Four] got us started basically. And those early movies, you know, the half a dozen, six, seven eight pictures that they invested in, that we were able to cut our teeth on, within a comfortable environment... really it's a sort of textbook and perfect example of what should happen from subsidised backing, you know where you learn your trade and then you go out and find somebody who can commercially back you.<sup>121</sup>

Tim Bevan stated that Working Title owed its existence to Channel 4 for this reason, as before the company was taken under the wing of Polygram, 'interest in British work [was]...impossible to find. To have received that sort of support throughout the Eighties has amounted to a kind of miracle.'<sup>122</sup>

Working Title also provided Channel 4 with a strong slate of films, as David Rose attests:

While I was head of drama in Channel4's early days and running Film on Four in the eighties, people were always asking what it was we were looking for in the films we commissioned. It was a tough question... I didn't feel it was our job to be prescriptive about

Film on Four. Once Working Title had produced a number of features for the Channel, their distinctive body of work provided one answer to that question.<sup>123</sup>

Under PFE, Working Title was able to overcome many of the problems endemic to independent British film companies. The company now had access to the US distributor Gramercy as well as the financial backing which allowed them to spend more time on pre-production. The early 1990s can be seen as a turning point for the company, and with the move to PolyGram and the departure of Sarah Radclyffe, its focus shifted towards more commercially viable filmmaking. At the same time, Channel 4 was beginning the transition, under Michael Grade, to selling its own advertising, and the focus of the Channel slowly shifted towards more mainstream, popular programming. Though Film on Four was allowed to continue under David Aukin, attitudes towards film financing among television executives at the Channel became more favourable following a string of commercial successes in the mid-1990s beginning with *Shallow Grave*, then *Four Weddings and a Funeral*, *Trainspotting*, *East is East* and many others.<sup>124</sup> David Wood also argues that the breakdown in the relationship between Channel 4 and British Screen in the mid-1990s led to:

A new set of partnerships...that have enabled the channel to get involved in glossier, bigger budget productions. Films funded by wealthy US distributors or UK based entertainment groups such as PolyGram Filmed Entertainment enable Channel 4 to bask in the reflected glory of hit films without taking the financial risks.<sup>125</sup>

These changes at Channel 4 and Working Title were arguably reflective of the industry as a whole during this era. The British film industry has historically dealt with the challenge of Hollywood in two ways: by producing low budget features aimed at a British market, or by striving to produce larger-budget features with high production values in order to make a profit in the US market. In 1990s, the general

impetus was arguably towards the latter. Paul Dave also argues that Working Title's post 1980s history displayed, 'the contemporary alignment of the British Film industry with, in the words of co-chairman Eric Fellner, "filmmaking as a global business"'.<sup>126</sup>

*Four Weddings and a Funeral* was Working Title's first truly 'global' film.

Originally intended to be a Channel 4 production, pre-production had been abandoned for 'creative reasons'.<sup>127</sup> The original budget was £2.9 million, of which Channel 4 contributed around £1 million. Working Title had developed a good relationship with Richard Curtis on *The Tall Guy* (Mel Smith, 1989) so much so that Curtis decided to approach the company with the script for *Four Weddings*.<sup>128</sup>

Maggie Brown suggests that PFE did not want to fund the title fully because Hugh Grant was an unknown quantity overseas, and so they allowed Channel 4 to provide a significant amount of the budget.<sup>129</sup> *Four Weddings* would not have been such a runaway hit if Working Title had not been operating within Polygram. PFE marketing executive Peter Graves devised a strategy that was unusual at the time but has been much copied since. They planned to open the film in the US rather than the UK, the reasoning being that if the film opened in the UK and flopped, there was a very small chance that it would achieve success internationally.<sup>130</sup> To minimise advertising costs, the film was given a 'platform' release, a distribution method common to small independent US companies whereby a film would be released on just a few screens and then slowly expanded to more cinemas based on the success of word-of-mouth marketing. *Four Weddings* was initially marketed solely in New York and Los Angeles and opened on just five screens, performing successfully enough to be gradually broadened over a period of weeks to around 700 screens around the country.<sup>131</sup>

Internationally the film eventually made around \$200 million,

although Nigel Mather suggests that the relationship between Channel 4 and Working Title may have been soured by these financial returns. Michael Grade had initially claimed that the Channel would receive around £4 million for its investment. However, during a committee meeting to discuss the state of the film industry in 1995, Labour MP Joe Ashton suggested that Channel 4 had been ‘taken to the cleaners’ considering the massive financial success of the film. Michael Kuhn responded to these claims with vitriol: ‘Channel 4 puts 2p into our films and then complains when they get £5 million back, so screw them.’<sup>132</sup> Nevertheless, Channel 4 was able to reap the success of the film when the television premiere gained twelve million viewers, the highest ratings in the Channel’s history.<sup>133</sup>

The winning formula of *Four Weddings* and the Working Title/Richard Curtis relationship led to a series of now characteristic ‘Working Title films’. *Notting Hill* (which was begun under PFE in 1998 and moved to Universal along with Working Title) *Bridget Jones’ Diary* and *Love Actually* (Richard Curtis, 2003) are a series of romantic comedies that have been much criticised for portraying an idealised white middle-class view of Britain to an international audience. This is a world where floppy-haired fools and bumbling aristocrats inhabit English town houses in areas of London where ethnic minorities have mysteriously ceased to exist.<sup>134</sup> Tim Dowling wrote an article shortly after the release of *Notting Hill* entitled ‘Curtis’ Britain’ in which

The largest proportion [of characters] will naturally have gone to either Oxford or Cambridge, in keeping with the fact that approximately 70% of the population attended one or the other...English people rarely go into work, and if they do they generally carry out their jobs with an endearing incompetence. They just happen to believe there are more important things in life, like swearing and snow.<sup>135</sup>

Nick James argues that when British films are aimed at a global marketplace they defer to American notions of 'Britishness' and the series of films produced following the success of *Four Weddings* bolstered this idea with their celebration of traditional notions of British reserve and self-deprecation.<sup>136</sup> Tim Bevan has long propounded the idea that in order to produce successful British films a company needs a marketable product and a good relationship with Hollywood. However, he has also argued that this relationship does not have to be at the expense of engagement with British politics and culture. Before the release of *My Beautiful Laundrette*, Bevan stated in an article for *AIP&Co* that in order to achieve a healthy industry 'producers should be guiding the creativity in the film world into making films that are of a broad interest and entertaining... [and] if *My Beautiful Laundrette*, a film about a gay Pakistani Laundrette owner, can find US distribution then the area for commercial success is very wide.'<sup>137</sup>

However, *Laundrette* only received a very limited theatrical release, and subsequent Working Title films marketed in the US have shown that the company's relationship with Hollywood 'necessitates a compromise, smoothing away the specifically British aspects of the subject.'<sup>138</sup> Annabel Roe argues that the British film industry has long been uncomfortable with Working Title's relationship with the US for this reason, with many critics regarding them as 'commercial sell-outs to Hollywood.'<sup>139</sup> Perhaps this is evidence of underlying tensions within the company regarding the limits of creative freedom. Working Title has always had the power to 'greenlight' projects from within the studio system, but it was a necessary pre-requisite for Michael Khun that these films should be commercially viable overseas. Under PFE the company thus relinquished the freedom to make the riskier social-



political dramas that had been the hallmark of their partnerships with Channel 4 the 1980s.

The international success of films like *Four Weddings* brought increased confidence to the British film industry, and the next Working Title/Channel 4 collaboration, *Elizabeth*, was produced at the height of that confidence. Though the Channel did not have any editorial input on *Elizabeth*, it had previously co-produced *The Madness of King George*, and the success of this film directly influenced Working Title's decision to produce the film. PFE executive Julia Short said 'we did a great deal of research into previous costume dramas, and we took *The Madness of King George* as our ruler.'<sup>140</sup> *Elizabeth* was part of a number of historical biopics produced in the 1990s like *King George* and the BBC funded *Mrs Brown* (John Madden, 1997), although it took a radically different approach to the genre.<sup>141</sup> The film is a conspiratorial thriller that is more in keeping with *The Godfather* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1972) in visual style than Merchant-Ivory productions. Indeed, Tim Bevan stated that the Working Title team watched *The Godfather* for ideas as to how to structure the film.<sup>142</sup> The development of *Elizabeth* was thus consciously radical on the part of the producers, and this was further exemplified by their choice of director. Shekhar Kapur had never made an English-language film, and his previous film, *The Bandit Queen* (1994), was so violent and sexually explicit that it was banned by the Indian censors.

*The Bandit Queen* had been funded by Channel 4, and this had perhaps influenced the choice of Kapur as director.<sup>143</sup> Kapur's style is undoubtedly reflected in the style of the film, with its past-paced editing rather than the more leisurely feel of traditional British historical films. The camerawork is also less reverential than Merchant-Ivory productions, obtrusively tracking characters around onscreen rather

than distancing the camera from the characters.<sup>144</sup> *Elizabeth* falls into the category of films that Church Gibson notes as 'post-heritage', along with productions such as *Shakespeare in Love* (John Madden, 1998) and *The Wings of the Dove* (Iain Softely, 1997).<sup>145</sup> *Sight and Sound* characterised the film as 'a far cry from the sterility of British heritage movies...But what Kapur does do is capture the age's intensity and oddity ... its otherness from us as well as him.'<sup>146</sup> James Chapman draws parallels between *Elizabeth* and Alexander Korda's *The Private life of Henry VIII* (1933) by the fact that the film is populist rather than stuffy and seeks to re-mould the historical biopic for younger audiences.<sup>147</sup> Thus, despite how critics might feel about the popularising of British history and misrepresentation of British culture, the Working Title/Channel 4 co-productions of the 1990s have yielded international success, giving birth two new types of film – the 'Working Title rom-com' and a new kind of post-heritage historical film that has radically re-worked traditional notions of the biopic.

To conclude, Working Title has enjoyed considerable success through a series of production partnerships with Channel 4. The critical acclaim of *My Beautiful Laundrette* launched the career of the company and also heralded a series of further partnerships with the Channel throughout the 1980s and early 1990s. These early partnerships were to the mutual benefit of both companies, with Working Title building a reputation for experience while at the same time providing the Channel with a series of quality low-budget productions. The 1990s saw a shift in direction for Channel 4 and Working Title with the focus of both companies becoming more commercial under Michael Grade and PFE respectively. Partnerships between Channel 4 and Working Title were fewer in the late 1990s, although the Channel 4 production *The Madness of King George* served as an inspiration for a

new collaboration with *Elizabeth*, a film which marked a break with the British heritage tradition in its stylized portrayal of history and self-conscious critique of the genre. However, although *Four Weddings* and *Elizabeth* can be seen as being among the most culturally significant productions to come out of the Channel 4/Working Title relationship, the influence of the Channel can be most strongly identified throughout the first seven years of the company's life, and it was partly through the support and encouragement of Channel 4 that this small independent eventually became one of the most successful production companies in British history.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has outlined the various practices of Channel 4 in dealing with different types of company, financially and editorially. These relationships have told us much about Film on Four, its commissioning process and its remit and motivations. The relationships between the Channel and independent production companies can also tell us much about the industry, the conditions which allowed certain production companies to flourish, and led to the failure of others. Indeed, many companies tended to fail due to an inherent lack of sustainability within the industry, which tended to be production rather than distribution led. Though Channel 4 did support companies like Working Title, it was undoubtedly Working Title's access to distribution through its parent company of PolyGram (and later Universal) which led to its overwhelming success. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, many independent companies received long term funding from Channel 4, support which in many ways contributed to the growth of these companies and to the benefit of the British film industry in general.

How far was Working Title's and Palace's success/failure down to individual working practices? How was Working Title able to maintain producing three to four films per year, while Palace was seen as taking on too much? Was this simply down to the vagaries of marketing and distribution, or popular taste? The consistency of Working Title's capacity to break even on small British films may cast doubt on this idea. For years Working Title had struggled to raise finances for each of their productions, undergoing a series of stressful negotiations, living from film to film and trying to raise finance from disparate sources, with no guarantee of distribution. This was the life of most independent producers working in Britain at this time without the backing of a major studio, and with little in the way of tax breaks or government sponsorship in place. Palace was also in a minority in that the company had access to its own distribution arm, which contributed to its success even though it eventually failed due to a combination of overproduction and mismanagement. However, though sustainability was difficult to find, for companies like Working Title, Channel 4 did provide a relatively consistent source of funding, supporting the company throughout a decade when the industry was in constant decline. Furthermore, as well as having a commitment to training new writing and directorial talent, the Channel also acted as a training ground for many new independent companies, operating efficient and detailed systems of cost control and also offering the benefit of years of experience in dealing with other independents, co-financiers and distributors. In this way, the Channel gave new producers a valuable insight into the business. As a result of these many factors, Channel 4's sponsorship practices came to have a significant impact on film production in Britain and on the structure of the British film industry in general. Chapter 4 will move away from discussions about the industry to focus on working practices; namely, the ways in which Film on

Four worked creatively with individuals and carried out its remit for encouraging new talent.

## Chapter 4

### Management, creativity and support for new talent.

#### Introduction

This chapter will look at Film on Four's relationship with filmmakers, in terms of their initiatives to work with, encourage and find new talent, while also attempting to analyse the place of the Drama Department within the wider organisational structure of the Channel. This will also offer an opportunity to explore in detail some of the ideas mentioned in Chapter 1 with regard to creativity, autonomy and the importance of personality in the industry, as well as offering some insights into the Drama Department's unusual position mediating between film and television. This chapter will draw upon recent works on cultural production in order to address these issues, while also drawing on sociological and economic work on the cultural industries. The tension between creativity and commercial constraint in broadcasting has long been the subject of many academic studies, but how profound was this tension, specifically within Channel 4? Perhaps the answer to this question is far more ambiguous than has previously been assumed – rather than creative 'constraint' in this context, a better phrase might be creative 'negotiation'. Furthermore, how do films come to be commissioned, and what are the conditions through which talent is 'encouraged'?

In answer to these questions, this chapter will offer a case study of Danny Boyle's 1994 film *Shallow Grave*, which will provide an analysis of the ways in which Aukin and his team worked with individual filmmakers. This case study will also seek to explore the relationship between Film on Four and upper-management at the Channel, arguing that the success of individual productions could determine

policy and decision-making on an executive level. Supporting new filmmakers was a part of Film on Four's remit from its beginnings in 1982, and with this in mind, this chapter will also examine the effectiveness of Channel 4's short film strand, Short and Curlies (1987-1995) in finding and supporting new filmmaking talent. This short study will also offer an insight into an oft-neglected aspect of film scholarship; namely, the importance of contacts, informal networks and relationships in film production.

### **Some literature on creativity in film and broadcasting: in search of a conceptual framework**

This section will discuss some of the existing literature on creativity in broadcasting and film production, although this will not be an exhaustive review – rather, it will offer an examination of some approaches which may prove useful for this particular study. Literature on the 'creative industries' burgeoned from the late 1990s/early 2000s, following the emergence of this concept as a focus for government policy after the election of the Labour government in 1997. Perhaps because the term 'creative industries' spans such a wide range of industrial activities, work around this area tends not to relate to specific case studies about the film and television industry; instead, much of this work provides a very general framework of the ways one can analyse the structure of the creative industries and position this sector in relation to wider government policy. Chris Bilton's studies on creativity in the cultural industries derive from the field of economics and management, marrying business (management theory) with cultural studies. However, this work is too general to relate to one particular industry, and does not provide any real detailed case studies.<sup>1</sup>

David Hesmondalgh combines a variety of approaches from sociology, cultural studies, communication studies and social theory in order to provide an overview of

the key issues within the cultural industries. Hesmondhalgh's work on organisations and creative workers in the media industries will provide a useful point of reference for this chapter.

James Roberts Georgina Born and Dina Berkeley have looked in detail at how film and television companies operate. Born provides a detailed ethnographic study of the BBC in the later 1990s, while Roberts focuses on the relationship between creativity and commercialism in film and television production contexts.<sup>2</sup>

Berkeley's work on British television drama looks at the various levels of constraint involved in drama production. In terms of specific case studies of productions and organisations, much useful empirical research on film and television production has emerged too recently to be applied to an historical analysis of the 1990s – for example, David Lee published research in creative labour in the television industry in 2011, while Baher Durmaz's study on creativity and place was published in 2010.

However, Durmaz's study does offer a useful conceptual framework for analysing the networks of relationships which arise from geographical clusters in the film industry.<sup>3</sup> While Robert's research focuses specifically on television and film

production companies in the mid-2000s, his work does draw upon the history of creativity and commercialism in broadcasting over the past twenty years. Other academics have sought to provide a theoretical framework through which to view film production processes – in 2012 Eva Revall analysed creativity in film production through the lens of Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's Systems view of creativity from the school of Creative Problem Solving (CPS) and applied this to a specific case study.<sup>4</sup> This seemingly ground-breaking work attempted to explain the entire film production process from idea-stage to reproduction using an established theoretical framework. In this model creativity is the result of interplay between



three systems: the field (society), the domain (culture) and the individual. While a seemingly a good specific framework for studying production, Revall seems unclear about what the 'field' and the 'domain' should encompass, or where audience reception and critical discourse should fit into this model. Revall's characterisation of the first draft of a film script as an 'initial problem' which is 'solved' (redrafted into a finished product) through collaboration also seems reductive.<sup>5</sup>

Durmaz draws upon cluster theory in order to explore the relationship between creativity and place, offering case studies of film production in Soho and Istanbul. This research focuses on the importance of the informal networks of relationships that are established when related companies are concentrated in one area. This is why the classic model of agglomeration in economic theory as first outlined by Alfred Marshall can be useful for characterising these relationships, when discussing film production companies located in London, which, in 2001, 'housed no less than 70% of all jobs in the production and distribution of film and video and 55% of jobs in television.'<sup>6</sup> But Cluster Theory has been criticised as chaotic and lacking in definition, with no clear industrial or geographical boundaries and no real agreement on the different forces which promote the concentration of firms in one area.<sup>7</sup> However, it can be useful for analysing how networks of informal relationships spring up from companies working in close proximity, and in assessing the importance of these informal networks of contacts to the growth and health of the film industry.

Thus, there is no one-size-fits-all conceptual framework for studying creativity in broadcasting and film production. Most of the works cited here draw from various fields – sociology, cultural studies, ethnography, geography, business and economics. This chapter will primarily draw upon the work of Hesmondalgh,

Roberts and Berkeley in order to examine creative decision-making processes within Channel 4, and to provide some analysis of the ways in which the Drama Department worked with filmmakers from within the changing broadcasting environment of the Channel. The work of Roberts and Berkely will be particularly useful, as these studies specifically analyse the interaction of creativity and commercial constraint within broadcasting organisations. This chapter will also apply the work of Durmaz and Turok on business clusters when discussing the relationship between Channel 4 and the film industry. The first part of this chapter will aim to focus on the Channel's internal organisational structure, providing an examination of the extent of individual autonomy and creative freedom within established commissioning structures. The second half of this chapter will deploy these ideas in order to focus on the Drama Department's external relations with the film industry, through case studies of Danny Boyle's 1994 film *Shallow Grave* and a brief study of the Short and Curlies short film initiative launched by the Channel in 1987 to find new writing and directing talent.

### **Negotiating constraint?**

The following sections will look at the internal broadcasting environment of Channel 4 and how this changed over time, as well as looking at the position of the Drama Department (specifically, Film on Four) within the Channel. This section will begin by looking more widely at the changing internal broadcasting environment of the Channel, before moving in to focus on the ways in which projects were commissioned, as well as the changing role of the Commissioning Editor. The goal will be to provide some contextual frameworks for thinking about the creative and commercial decision-making processes which culminated in the final approval to commission a Film on Four production.

The body of literature around the creative industries has historically assumed an antithetical relationship between the creative and commercial elements of any organisation. This is a view that has been heavily influenced by Bourdieu's 'field of struggle' and DiMaggio's characterisation of artists striving for creative expression while management attempts to control and predict the outcome of that expression.<sup>8</sup> As James Roberts argues:

Creative issues and aims are considered to be the province of writers, script editors, actors, directors and, to some extent, producers. Non-creative activities and goals are the province of typically full-time 'humdrum interests'...including lawyers, finance and administrative staff, marketing and sales teams, and general management.<sup>9</sup>

According to Hesmondalgh, the idea that creativity can only function away from commercialism has been deeply ingrained in Western culture, even though artists have always needed to find an audience, and, as we shall see, financial and conceptual boundaries can often stimulate the work of filmmakers.<sup>10</sup> Roberts argues that commerce and creativity are more intertwined in film and TV production than is commonly assumed, and that the notion of 'tension' between the creative and commercial interests of a broadcaster like Channel 4 is indeed a simplistic one. In research drawn from interviews carried out among staff from the BBC, ITV and Channel 4, Roberts attempted to find out how the relationship between commerce and creativity functioned within these companies, and concluded that:

- Change occurred on a daily basis - systems were not monolithic and unchanging.
- Early assessment and development of ideas was fairly informal, and revolved around emails, phone calls and discussions

- Even the most junior members of a team considered the commercial elements of a programme, where it was aimed at and where it might fit in the schedule, and this was factored in to creative decision making
- Writers appeared to have a built-in understanding of the above processes, even though commonly considered to be the most creative people in an organisation
- Business staff were very aware of creative issues, and would often sit in at early-stage meetings
- Conflict was evident, but not always polarised along creative/business lines (ie, it might concern the 'look' of a programme).<sup>11</sup>

In general, in Roberts' work commerce and creativity were not seen as being antagonistic, but rather, part of the everyday reality of television: 'Decision-making was not characterized as the clash of two very divergent agendas, but rather the more subtle interplay of mutually influential factors dictated by a generally realistic view of what television drama is there to do'.<sup>12</sup> However, it is still important to bear in mind that, as Hesmondalgh notes, while often not polarised along creative/commercial lines, in broadcasting as well as in the film industry the relationship between creativity and commercialism has been a very complex mixture of 'struggle, constraint and negotiation'.<sup>13</sup>

Based on interviews with television executives, Roberts' research does suggest that in the past differences between creative and commercial concerns within broadcasters have been more acute. In the last fifteen to twenty years, television has seen a move away from a broadcasting environment of limited competition where gaining access to television channels was difficult (but ensured wide audiences), to an environment where access to television is easier, given the larger number of

channels, but where securing large audiences is rare. This has arguably led to all 'television workers' taking more of an interest in commercial issues and the needs and wants of the audience.<sup>14</sup> Indeed, in the more competitive environment of the 1990s, those who worked for Channel 4 on all levels had to think with a view to the commercial, which in turn went in hand with increased professionalism. Aukin argues that Michael Grade built 'on what Jeremy Isaacs had done but also [made the Channel] professionally able to cope with the modern landscape of broadcasting.'<sup>15</sup> Robert's research on creativity and commercialism in film and television production does go some way in providing detailed examples of how the broadcasting ecology changed in the 1990s and 2000s. At Channel 4, staff were at all levels were increasingly thinking with a view to commercial considerations, though not necessarily at the expense of creative decision-making. As John Willis (Channel 4's Director of Programming) noted in 1997, in the 1980s the Channel had seemed:

curiously disconnected from its audience... It was as if the Channel was commissioning for its peers not its viewers. Nine years on, the competitive environment is totally different. Channel 4 is smarter, more orderly, more professional. There are fewer ragged edges but, above all, the mission and the passion are still there.<sup>16</sup>

David Aukin and his team were liaising with filmmakers to commission film productions, not television drama. However, these changes in ecology must be taken into account, as although Film on Four enjoyed a considerable amount of autonomy within the Channel, it was still part of the broadcasting environment and thus bound up with the internal structures and decision making procedures inherent in that environment.

Making a film or a television drama is a complex process which varies between television and film production. Within broadcasting, particularly relating to commissioning, there is a complex decision making process to be accounted for

before a programme, or film, goes into production – a decision making process which depends upon internal structures and a variety of factors. Dina Berkeley, in her work on drama production, attempts to sum up this process:

A particular television drama programme, as produced and transmitted, is the end result of a series of interactions between a number of different systems, each with its own personal/institutional goals as well as responsibilities (broadcasters, producers, actors, directors), and concentrating on a specific goal common to all: to realise a particular drama production. However, each system has its own notion of what creativity entails and its own notion of value of a prospective product.<sup>17</sup>

In addition, Berkeley identifies the different levels of ‘constraints’, which had an effect on drama production, from governmental level to specific productions, which could indirectly and directly affect the production process:

A – the social world at large, especially as it pertains to the entire media industry (eg economic pressures, regulation, legal issues, politics, relevant technology)

B – the general *climate/structure* of the drama producing/commissioning industry (eg. Character of competition, market forces, seller/buyer relations, regulations specific to drama production/commissioning).

C – The position the organisation holds within the drama-producing and commissioning industrial structure (eg. Motivations, management structures, role in the industry, power, responsibility).

D – The management of drama productions/commissioning within the particular organisation (eg. Rules, portfolios of drama productions sought after, principles of working, policies).

E – the particular drama production process itself and its management (eg. Content, format, resources, production management practices) which will produce the commissioned product.

These different levels, and the ways in which they can influence the production process, must be born in mind. The producer balances and negotiates all the different concerns voiced by people working on/commissioning the project, and coping with any emergencies.<sup>18</sup> The Commissioning Editor (in this case Aukin) also has a significant role in this process of balancing and negotiation.

However, Berkeley tends to see these different factors as ‘constraining’ forces on producers – an argument that seems unable to encompass the complex process of negotiation which characterises drama production. The organisation, the management within that organisation and particular factors relating to a production do not simply seek to constrain the filmmaker, or the mediator (the Commissioning Editor). In order to elaborate on this, it might be helpful to think about the role of the mediator, or Commissioning Editor, specifically within the context of Channel 4. The job of the Commissioning Editor was not just to approve scripts, but to work in a number of capacities. As Jeremy Isaacs set out in a programme policy document in 1985, these were governed by the following areas – what we might think of as levels of ‘influence’. Upper levels of ‘influence’ included: Channel 4’s terms of reference with the IBA programme policy statement; the Channel’s overall programme policy, as developed by the board and the programme committee; the number of hours of programming allocated to a certain area (like news, sport, etc), and the financial resources budgeted for that subject area.<sup>19</sup> The Commissioning Editor was directly responsible to the Chief Executive and/or the Programme Controller. David Rose

was directly responsible to Jeremy Isaacs, for example, with no management structures in-between, whereas in the early 1990s (after the Channel had undergone internal changes under Michael Grade) David Aukin was initially responsible to Liz Forgan, and *then* to Michael Grade. In 1985, Jeremy Isaacs outlined the role of the Commissioning Editor as follows:

The CE must:

- Agree general policy for the strands/programmes they are responsible for and communicate this to Programme controller.
- Also communicate this policy to programme suppliers and itv companies
- 'Where appropriate', initiate projects in line with this policy by approaching the production companies and inviting them to participate.
- Choose and distinguish among competing submissions from programme makers
- Agree a detailed brief with the programme supplier
- Liaise with the programme supplier during production - by visiting locations, viewing rushes etc – 'to ensure the programme is being produced in accordance with the editor's requirements.'
- Liaise with Programme Cost Controllers for all of the above
- Liaise with programme controller and the Head of Programme Planning to discuss appropriate scheduling of programmes
- Liaise with press dept to discuss the best way for the programme to be publicised.
- Ensure that the admin details associate with programme transmission (music, billings, cue sheets, presentation details etc) are dealt with.
- Discussions with the Chief executive, the programme controller and discussions in the Programme Planning Committee and Programme review committee helps to 'determine the editorial direction of the Channel.'
- The CE must represent the Channel to independent producers, at conferences, at festivals etc.<sup>20</sup>

As we can see, the Commissioning Editor had a wide range of responsibilities. Many of these responsibilities involved negotiation with various departments to agree budgets/slot/publicity for a programme, but also to monitor the programme to make sure that it was falling within the requirements agreed between the producer and the Channel. The Commissioning Editor also had editorial input where programme



policy was concerned, through discussion with upper management. The list above arguably falls within points C, D and E of Berekeley's list. But rather than being defined as 'constraints', these should be seen as necessary structures, or factors for negotiation.

### **Between television and film**

In many respects, Film on Four can be seen as lying between television and the film industry, with Rose and Aukin negotiating between the two industries. Within the Drama Department, Film on Four occupied an unusual position in that David Rose, David Aukin and their respective teams were essentially working with the film industry, but housed inside a television broadcaster. Allon Reich, Assistant Commissioning Editor for Film between 1994 and 1998, states that because he was working predominantly with film producers, writers and directors, 'I felt much more like I was working in the film industry... So I knew the people – colleagues – in Channel 4 but I only knew them because they worked in Channel 4... I never felt that was my job.'<sup>21</sup> Aukin characterised television and film as being distinct communities, with those at the Drama Department having to negotiate both worlds:

I think there was something very nourishing about being part of a wider community, and so you know the film world is quite a tight, you know, enclosed community anyway, and to have, to be able to think outside that box, to live in an environment that wasn't just obsessed with film I think is quite healthy and enabled you to take in all sorts of other influences and ideas.<sup>22</sup>

This hints at the ambiguous position of film commissioning within the Channel.

With Film on Four, the Drama Department essentially had to negotiate between two different fields of production. This idea is essential for understanding Film on Four's working practices and relationships with filmmakers and producers between 1982 and 1998.

In the 1990s, when the Channel was increasingly investing more money in Film on Four, it does seem peculiar that the Drama Department continued to operate fairly autonomously within the Channel (though also within the commissioning structures outlined above). However, Hesmondalgh argues that creative autonomy is a necessary part of the production process in commercial/cultural organisations, but that this level of autonomy is balanced by excessive control over channels of distribution. According to Hesmondalgh, this is a wider characteristic evident in the ‘complex professional era’, which is characterised by loose control over creative input and tighter control over reproduction and circulation: ‘First, companies grant symbolic creators a limited autonomy in the hope that creators will come up with something original and distinctive enough to be a hit. But this means that cultural companies are engaged in a constant process of struggle to control what symbolic creators are likely to come up with.’<sup>23</sup> In this era we *do* see an increased desire on the part of the Channel to control the distribution outlets for Films on Four. This is hardly surprising as the Channel, like most film production companies operating in the UK, had long suffered from a lack of control over whether a film would get distribution, and how it would be marketed by a distributor. Although autonomy was still a traditional feature of the Drama Department in Channel 4 under Michael Grade, concern over the commercial performance of Film on Four can be seen in the Channel’s increased measures to control the marketing, distribution and exhibition of their films, starting with the creation of a distribution arm, Film Four Distributors, in 1994, and Film Four Video in 1995. These distribution interests will be focused on in greater detail in Chapter 5 of this thesis.

This idea of ‘autonomy’ does need to be qualified, inasmuch as Commissioning Editors had autonomy only in relation to the institutional structured

discussed above; the department did not operate outside these forces. But the degree of creative freedom was significant, especially when compared to the more convoluted administrative processes of the BBC. And, as has been discussed, this was a feature of the Channel that could be especially useful, from the perspective of a filmmaker. The autonomy to ‘greenlight’ a script, or at least argue the case for a film directly with the Chief Executive, aided the position of the Film on Four in working with the film industry, as it enabled them to operate more on the wavelength of a film production company.

Hesmondalgh uses the term ‘creative manager’ as a more apt and less confused term than Bordieu’s ‘cultural intermediaries’ or Di Maggio’s ‘broker’ to describe those persons who typically work within organisations and mediate between the interests of executives, who are interested in profit or prestige, and the interests of creative personnel (directors/writers).<sup>24</sup> In Chapter 1 this thesis argued that Rose and Aukin might be seen as a ‘creative Commissioning Editors’ in that much of the work they commissioned tends to follow particular styles or aesthetics or editorial processes. Using Hesmondhalgh’s terminology, Rose and Aukin might also be seen as ‘creative managers’ in that they did mediate between these interests. However, the term is also extremely reductive. For example, the autonomy afforded to Rose and the broadcasting environment of Channel 4 in the 1980s means that his role cannot be described as one of ‘mediating’ between commercial and creative interests. The respective roles of Aukin and Rose, while certainly ‘creative’, were too complex and varied to be described using a blanket term (‘manager’, ‘intermediary’, ‘broker’) – indeed, even the term ‘Commissioning Editor’ is not entirely accurate, as Aukin in particular did more than simply commission productions, but continued to work closely with filmmakers in a creative capacity, offering advice and suggestions.

As noted earlier in this thesis, from 1982, Rose and his department regularly received around 2000 scripts and treatments per year, while Aukin was receiving around 100-150 per week by 1995.<sup>25</sup> Although this idea will be explored in greater detail later in this chapter, it can be argued that the number of projects which came to fruition through personal contact and informal conversations (as opposed to unsolicited scripts) again hints at the ambiguous nature of Film on Four within the Channel. The Drama Department was operating as a commissioner of television programming, but through Film on Four, it was also engaging with a large informal network of film industry contacts. In commissioning a script for production, relationships and informal meetings and discussions were just as important as established process, if not more so. And, as the following case study illustrates, a commission could simply be the result of being in the right place at the right time.

#### **Case study: Film on Four, *Shallow Grave* and the new creative culture of the 1990s**

In 1994 David Aukin commissioned *Shallow Grave*, made by the collaborative team of Andrew Macdonald, John Hodge and Danny Boyle, who then went on to work on *Trainspotting* with the Channel in 1996 and *A Life Less Ordinary* in 1997. In many ways, this film can give us an important insight into how Channel 4 encouraged and worked with new filmmaking talent. This film was also extremely influential in shaping attitudes to Film on Four on the part of the Channel's top executives, while the success of the film at the domestic box office can also provide an insight into the increasing importance of Film on Four to the Channel's own brand identity.

As has already been noted, the broadcasting culture at Channel 4 changed gradually from the 1980s to the 1990s, which was due to a number of factors. When

David Aukin left the Channel in 1997, he published a series of letters in the *Guardian* that he had written to his son over the years, detailing his experiences at the Channel. In one extract, he wrote:

Today, October 1, 1990, I started at C4. Asked for all existing statistics about the films they'd commissioned since year zero and was somewhat surprised to find, when the information arrived, there is no mention of audience figures on TV transmission. When I asked for this, my new colleagues were clearly appalled at the request. Their beloved Film On 4 is now in the hands of a populist and vulgarian. Help!<sup>26</sup>

This indicates that a polarisation between creative and commercial elements at the Channel was more evident in its early days. As Roberts argues, from the early 1990s onwards, commercial thinking became more ingrained in day-to-day processes in broadcasting in general. For Channel 4, this shift towards increased commercialism can be characterised as a gradual process, over a period of several years - a period arguably fraught with anxiety about the ability of the Channel to drum up enough advertising revenue after 1993 in order to stay afloat.

Television executives at the Channel were also uncertain regarding whether Film on Four could survive in the new, more commercial environment. In a way, *Shallow Grave* represented a real turning point for the strand. The film follows the story of three middle-class flatmates living in Edinburgh who decide to recruit a fourth housemate only to find him dead shortly afterwards, having left behind a big pile of cash. They decide to keep the money and bury the body in the shallow grave of the film's title. Though Michael Grade reacted badly to the film during an early private screening, dubbing it 'untransmittable', it became the first Film on Four in years to recoup its costs at the domestic box office. At the Dinard film festival in 1994 Michael Grade presented MacDonald, Hodge and Boyle with the award for Best Film. According to Film on Four deputy Commissioning Editor Allon Reich,

Grade 'turned up with two huge bottles of magnum champagne and said "well, that shows you what I know about film."'”<sup>27</sup> This was a defining moment for Film on Four in many ways, not least because, according to Reich, Michael Grade never looked at a cut of anything Film on Four produced again.<sup>28</sup> The success of the film strengthened the position of Film on Four within the Channel, and, as we shall see, along with films like *Four Weddings and a Funeral*, and *Trainspotting*, became an important part of the identity and branding of Channel 4 in this period.

As we have seen, the process of commissioning a Film on Four had not, in theory, changed much since the Channel's inception. Support for filmmakers was based on a pre-established commissioning system and a complex network of relationships. As the production history behind *Shallow Grave* illustrates, commissions could also simply be the result of luck. In 1993, David Aukin attended an industry conference in Inverness where producer Andrew MacDonald reportedly slipped Aukin's driver a five pound note and the script for *Shallow Grave* hoping that he would hand it over. According to Aukin, he read the script on the plane back to London simply because he didn't have anything else to read, and was so impressed that he decided to commission it. In 1993 Channel 4 agreed to finance the film to the amount of £850,000 on the condition that the Glasgow Film Fund would contribute the other £150,000.<sup>29</sup> All that remained was to find someone to direct it. Andrew Macdonald and John Hodge tried an unconventional approach to the situation, deciding to audition directors for the job. The script was sent to twenty directors, many of whom turned it down because the main characters were too unsympathetic, while some directors failed to make the cut because they wanted to make too many changes to the script. Danny Boyle won acceptance by describing the script as 'clean, mean and truly cinematic' and drawing comparisons to *Blood Simple*

(Joel and Ethan Coen, 1984) in the film's commitment to narrative and plot. With the core team of producer, writer and director in place, the script was then redrafted and perfected with the help of Aukin and his team. Overall, Boyle described the relationship with the Channel as supportive but not restrictive, stating that '[it] worked well. We all agreed that we'd like the plot to be more complex, which is something Channel 4 was pushing for as well. They were exemplary in the way they dealt with [us]— they kept hitting us with good strong suggestions, but we were free to use them or not',<sup>30</sup>

Hodge, MacDonald and Boyle planned at the outset that they would take equal creative credit for their films, travelling the festival circuit together and doing press interviews as a trio rather than individually. The team, particularly MacDonald, were concerned with replicating a long tradition of collaboration among British writers, producers and directors, often citing examples of longstanding collaborations like that between Powell and Pressburger and, more recently, that between Stephen Woolley and Neil Jordan, as influences. Indeed, Hodge's energetic writing style and MacDonald's commercial sensibilities considerably influenced the style and direction of both films. In Boyle's case the desire to work more collaboratively may have been influenced by his background as a theatre director. Boyle's first job was with co-operative theatre company Joint Stock. He wanted to continue to work this way, so suggested that the team should share fees and profit equally.<sup>31</sup> The same team, from technical crew to cinematographer, were also asked to work collectively on *Trainspotting*, seeking to avoid 'the attendant problems of trying to start up relationships with people every time you start a film'.<sup>32</sup> A joint collaboration of this nature was fairly unusual, but it was something that Aukin and his team sought to accommodate. This 'team effort' was something that MacDonald

and Boyle promoted in the publicity for their films, underlining the effort of the designers and other personnel. While *Shallow Grave* and *Trainspotting* are commonly thought of as ‘Danny Boyle films’, an effort was made on the part of the principal team to reinforce the collaborative nature of production and challenge the established notion among critics that creativity in film is the province of a select few such as the writer and director.

In 1994 *Variety* noted the rise of a new generation of British film directors who had made their reputations in theatre.<sup>33</sup> Ex Royal Court director Antonia Bird made waves with the BBC funded film *Priest*, while Nick Hamm was making *Talk of Angels* for Miramax. Aukin, as a former executive director of the national theatre, arguably played a role in encouraging stage directors to cross over.<sup>34</sup> In addition to working with Danny Boyle on *Shallow Grave*, Nicolas Hytner made his feature debut, *The Madness of King George*, through Film on Four, while Nancy Meckler directed the acclaimed Channel 4 film *Sister, My Sister*. Actors had traditionally crossed back and forth between theatre and film, but this was less the norm for stage directors. This was perhaps because union restrictions in the 1980s prevented stage directors from crossing over easily, but a loosening of these rules in the 1990s resulted in a noticeable trend. Aukin, who had amassed considerable experience during his own time working in theatre, felt that stage directors could bring their own particular strengths to filmmaking; namely, an innate understanding of narrative and the ability to work well with actors.

One way that Danny Boyle sought to facilitate a good relationship with Ewan McGregor, Kerry Fox and Christopher Eccleston on *Shallow Grave* was during the rehearsal stage. Boyle and the three actors moved into a flat during their one rehearsal week; they lived there, rehearsed, and invited people to pretend to



‘audition’ for the flat as part of a strategy to make them feel more comfortable playing flatmates. This is a strategy that Aukin continued to support, as Boyle used it again on *Trainspotting*, encouraging the actors and the crew to spend as much social time together as possible. According to Aukin, the skills of a former theatre director could be valuable because ‘when we’re working with theatre directors, I know we can assist them in virtually every technical area, give them great cameramen and designers, but the area where you cannot help a director is how to talk to an actor.’<sup>35</sup> Film on Four was thus instrumental in working with and encouraging a new generation of filmmakers who had made their reputations in theatre and were moving into film.

After *Shallow Grave*, the team was inundated by lucrative deals from Hollywood (Boyle famously turned down an offer to direct *Alien: Resurrection* [Jean-Pierre Jeunet, 1997]) but decided to stick together to make an adaptation of Irvine Welsh’s cult book *Trainspotting*. Channel 4 had provided the development funds for the film before *Shallow Grave* was released. The desire to work with Channel 4 again arose out of a couple of factors. The team wanted to keep the same crew and financiers, as they felt the crew were already familiar with each other and the team’s strategies. Andrew MacDonald also said that he felt a certain loyalty to the Channel because they had

believed in *Shallow Grave* when nobody else did and were so great to work with right through the production even through a few very tricky spots we had. I also felt that *Trainspotting* was a specialist film...and Channel 4 was the perfect place to take it. A big Hollywood studio wouldn’t have touched it – or if they had they would have made us change it beyond recognition. At Channel 4 we got to make the film we wanted as long as we kept the budget down.<sup>36</sup>

Working within low-budget filmmaking could thus be a constraining, but positive, force. Indeed, in interviews, Boyle often talked about the 'seige mentality' among a crew when working on a low-budget film.<sup>37</sup> MacDonald also stated 'we feel very strongly that we want [the Channel] involved. Not so much from the financial point of view (we were offered more money elsewhere) but from a creative point of view'. Channel 4 could offer filmmakers a space for creative freedom, offering advice and support but tending not to interfere too much editorially. Aukin was also concerned with protecting the creative interests of filmmakers – for example, PolyGram (who distributed *Shallow Grave*) had offered to co-finance *Trainspotting*, but only on the condition that one scene be cut from the script, the surreal scene of the film where the main character, Renton, dives into the self-professed 'worst toilet in Scotland' to retrieve his heroin capsules. The team were unhappy about this, and Aukin felt that this scene was integral to the film and that the Channel should instead fully finance it for £1.76m. In Aukin's words, this was 'a clear statement of why Channel 4 can be important to a filmmaker.'<sup>38</sup> This shows that the Channel could work to protect the interests of filmmakers in negotiations with other financiers who were concerned with box-office appeal at the expense of distinctiveness. The Channel invested significant money to ensure that the creative integrity of the production was kept intact – but this was also a shrewd decision, from the Channel's perspective. The team had already proven their capabilities with *Shallow Grave*, and had been working with Aukin and his team for some time – and Aukin was arguably familiar enough with their methods of working to trust their creative instincts.

Hesmondalgh argues that for any cultural organisation geared towards commercial success, such as a film studio, 'star symbol creators' - writers, directors, celebrities and products - are well rewarded and publicised as part of a desire to

offset risk by branding.<sup>39</sup> For the Channel, this idea of 'reward' worked quite literally, on one level. For example, in the late 1990s, following the success of films like *The Madness of King George*, *Shallow Grave*, *Four Weddings* and *Trainspotting*, Film on Four became increasingly important to the Channel's brand identity. The Channel's own emphasis on its activities as a filmmaker and a major force in British film production became far more pronounced. This can be seen particularly in the rhetoric adopted by Michael Grade, who, in 1994, began publicly campaigning for the Channel to be released from its obligation to provide ITV with a portion of its revenue as part of a 'safety net' should the Channel's advertising profits fall below 14%. In 1997, when the funding agreement was lifted, Grade injected £100m into Film on Four to be budgeted over the next four years. Individual productions became increasingly important to the Channel's corporate image, as did its relationship with directors like Danny Boyle and Damien O' Donnell, as films like *Trainspotting* and *East is East* came to serve as examples of the Channel's edgy, youth-orientated image.

In conclusion, *Shallow Grave* represented an important cornerstone for the Channel for a number of reasons. If Grade, Aukin and his team can be believed, the film was influential at the highest level within the structural organisation of the Channel and was one of a few productions which came to define the image of Film on Four in this era. *Shallow Grave* also provides an insight into how Film on Four changed under Aukin in the 1990s. Film on Four was moving in a new direction, in commissioning a genre film and essentially indicating the Channel's interest in broadening the range of the types of films commissioned. *Shallow Grave* also provides an example of how the Channel could provide support to first time filmmakers in terms of offering advice and suggestions, working with filmmakers at

script and production level. Aukin facilitated the collaboration between Boyle, Hodge, and MacDonald, working with them on all levels from development to production. The funding decision behind *Trainspotting* also shows that the Channel could act in protecting the interests of filmmakers in negotiation with other financiers and provides an example of how Channel 4 worked with filmmakers, not just on a one off basis, but continually. Though Film on Four became more commercial in this era, this was not an overriding factor, and the Channel continued to provide a space where filmmakers had the freedom to experiment, funding low-budget films within the public service remit of the Channel. However, the above case study looks at one film, and is thus too specific to draw general conclusions about the Film on Four's support for new talent from 1982. With this in mind, the following section will look at the Channel's short film strand, Short and Curlies, as a way examining the effectiveness of Film on Four's initiatives to find new filmmaking talent. This section will also aim to draw some conclusions regarding the importance of relationships in the film industry in terms of how projects come together from idea stage to production.

### **'Everything is happening here': talent finding initiatives and the importance of informal networks in filmmaking**

In 1987, Channel 4 collaborated on a series of 11-minute short films, in addition to their recently established feature film deal, in 'an effort to keep alive the genre of the short feature film and to encourage new filmmaking talent.'<sup>40</sup> From 1987 to 1995 the strand was known as The Short and Curlies, and was produced in conjunction with British Screen. However, following a bitter clash with British Screen after their deal with BSkyB to provide the pay-tv rights to most of the films they funded, Channel 4 ended this partnership and decided to produce these short films with the BBC

instead, with the strand being renamed Brief Encounters. From 1997 the strand was again renamed to Jump Cuts, and fully funded by the Channel. The following section will attempt to examine how useful this initiative actually was in providing Film on Four with a new generation of writing and directing talent. It will also argue that talent finding initiatives were less important to Film on Four than the relationships and contacts they generated, and will move more widely to discuss the importance of informal networks and contacts in the British film industry, drawing upon the work of Durmaz and Turok on Cluster Theory and Helen Blair on film industry employment to illustrate this point.

The aim of the 'Short and Curlies' series was to commission writers and directors who were already working in television or the arts who had never been given the opportunity to work on film. The title was taken from Mike Leigh's nineteen-minute short film *The Short and Curlies*, which was commissioned for the first series. Aside from Mike Leigh's film, it was mandatory that each film should be a directorial debut, and in many cases this was also true for the writers. According to a Channel 4 press release issued before the first series of the Short and Curlies was broadcast, some directors had come straight from film school, or were frustrated actors or technicians who were finding it extremely difficult to break into feature film directing – people like actor Peter Chelsom, animator Mole Hill and documentary filmmaker Sue Clayton.<sup>41</sup>

What was particularly innovative about this series was that rather than being 'short films' these productions were envisioned as being 'mini-features'. They were to be shot on 35mm, with the filmmakers working in the same conditions as they would be if they were making a Film on Four, from feature-film specific union agreements to production values and script quality.<sup>42</sup> The Channel also intended to

get distributors interested in screening these short films before main features in cinemas, at a time when short films were not popular, and screening shorts was uncommon.<sup>43</sup> The cost of these productions was to reflect this 'feature in miniature' aspect of the films, with budgets ranging from £70,000 –£100,000 throughout the life of the series.<sup>44</sup> In the Channel's Press Information Packs, the shorts were also often referred to as being '11 minute feature film[s]'.<sup>45</sup> The strand was also envisioned by the Channel as being 'a parallel to its support of features films through Film on Four.'<sup>46</sup> The close association with Film on Four shows that the Channel was attempting to discover and train new talent by assessing the ability of directors to work within feature-style constraints, with an eye to finding writers and directors who could make the transition to making feature length films.

Rising production costs were an incentive for making short films, in order to allow new filmmakers to make their mark. As Allon Reich, Channel 4 Commissioning Editor for Short and Curlies, stated: 'there's a lot of talent out there, and with established directors like Neil Jordan struggling to raise finance, what chance do young directors have? This is a way for them to get experience, and a way for the industry to find out what the next generation of filmmakers is doing.'<sup>47</sup> As a means of providing 'calling cards' for young filmmakers, the strand achieved varying degrees of success. Peter Chelsom, Mark Herman and Gurinder Chadha all moved on to their first features after directing their own short films, while writers like Philip Ridley (*The Krays* [1990]) moved on to screenplay writing. Gurinder Chadha's first short film 'I'm British, But...' was taken up by the BFI's pilot New Directors scheme, and she submitted *Bhaji on the Beach* on the strength of this. Channel 4 asked her to develop her skills on a Short and Curlies 11 minute film called 'A Nice Arrangement', and Chadha was given the go-ahead for *Bhaji* as the Channel was

pleased with her work.<sup>48</sup> In 1993 *The Independent* noted that more filmmakers were going down the short film route. Mark Herman went to Disney after making his short film 'Underground Conversation', subsequently persuading them to back *Blame it on the Bellboy* (1992). Following the success of her short film 'Heart Songs', Sue Clayton also made *The Disappearance of Finbar* (1996) for Channel 4.<sup>49</sup>

However, the series was never intended to serve as a creative outlet for relatively inexperienced would-be filmmakers. For example, Clayton was by no means a first-time director. She had made many television dramas and documentaries, and was in talks with Channel 4 to make a feature film prior to the production of her *Short and Curlies* film.<sup>50</sup> She stated in an interview in 1993:

It seems ironic that *Heart Songs* was billed as my first film, because it was actually something like my 17th, but all the others were documentaries or television dramas or whatever. *Heart Songs* was my first chance to work in 35mm and to think in terms of the depth that features can have - not just depth of character, but depth of image too. It gives you a different sense of place - we shot it all on location in Ontario - and of the relationship of characters to that place.<sup>51</sup>

Even *Short and Curlies* filmmakers straight out of film school had impressive qualifications. For example, Chris Fallon ('The New Look') graduated from the Royal College of Art in 1986, where he wrote and directed student films which achieved success at film festivals in Germany, France, Finland and the USA.

**Table 4.1:** List of *Short and Curlies* writers and directors who moved on to feature films (writer where specified)

Director/Writer	Short and Curlies/Brief Encounter	Subsequent feature films	Film on Four?
Simon Beaufoy	<i>Closer</i>	<i>The Darkest Light</i>	No
Anna Campion	<i>Broken Skin</i>	<i>Loaded</i>	No
Peter Cattaneo	<i>Dear Rosie</i>	<i>The Full Monty</i>	No
Gurinder Chadha	<i>A Nice Arrangement</i>	<i>Bhajji on the Beach, What's Cookin', Bend it like Beckham</i>	Yes ( <i>Bhaji on the Beach, Bend it Like Beckham</i> [2002])
Peter Chelsom	<i>Treacle</i>	<i>Made Hear my Song, Funny Bones, The Mighty</i>	Yes ( <i>Hear My Song</i> )
Sandra Goldbacher	<i>Seventeen</i>	<i>The Governess</i>	No
Terence Gross	<i>The Sin Eater</i>	<i>Hotel Spendide</i>	No
Mark Herman	<i>Unusual Ground Floor Conversion'</i>	<i>Blame it on the Bellboy, Brassed Off</i>	Yes ( <i>Brassed Off</i> )
Jo Hodges	<i>Silent Film</i>	<i>The Girl with Brains in Her Feet</i>	No
Amy Jenkins	<i>Blink (writer, director)</i>	<i>Elephant Juice (writer)</i>	No
Clare Kilner	<i>Daphne and Apollo (Brief</i>	<i>Janice Beard 45WPM</i>	No



	<i>Encounter)</i>		
Damien o Donnel	<i>Chrono-Perambulator</i>	<i>East is East</i>	Yes
Philip Ridley	<i>The Universe of Dermot Finn</i>	<i>The Reflecting Skin, The Krays, The Passion of Darkly Noon</i> (writer)	No
Benjamin Ross	<i>My Little Eye</i>	<i>Young Poisoners Handbook, RKO 281</i>	No
Peter Salmi & Carl Prechezer	<i>The Cutter</i>	<i>Blue Juice</i>	Yes
Sue Clayton	<i>Heart Songs</i>	<i>The Disappearance of Finbar</i>	Yes

(Source: Channel 4 Archives)

As table 4.1 illustrates, many Short and Curlies directors went on to work on subsequent feature films, many of them with Channel 4. However, considering the amount of short films produced by the Channel between 1987 and 1999, the number of directors making their first feature with the Channel was fairly small. In a recent interview, Allon Reich stated that the number of direct moves from the short films to Film on Four were lower than expected. Although ‘there was some conversion’ it was ‘not enough, I don’t think’.<sup>52</sup> However, Reich argued that the strand was very valuable in providing experience for filmmakers working in the industry in general: ‘There’s a few people who learned a lot and moved on, if you look at the crew and production aswell.’ Furthermore, the short film strand, though not as important ‘in

itself', was extremely important for attracting filmmakers to the Channel 4 offices, and developing relationships with young writers and directors as a result.<sup>53</sup>

Though the strand did not directly provide much of a talent base for Film on Four, it was, according to Reich, important in that it added to and expanded the network of relationships between the Channel and young writers, producers, directors and technicians.

As we have seen, the commissioning process was democratic and unrestricted, at least in theory. However, as noted in Chapter 3, in practice this could be problematic. The department did not have the staff to read every script submitted, and often projects arose from other avenues, such as informal contacts. Interestingly, although the commissioning process was intended to provide the department with the bulk of their programming material, according to Karin Bamborough, few films were actually the result of unsolicited scripts.<sup>54</sup> Relationships and informal meetings and discussions were thus as important as established process, if not more so. This method of working is particularly evident in the film industry, and as such one can argue that this informal network of relationships arose from the necessity of working with established film production companies, commissioning products for that industry as well as for television. Furthermore, as the *Shallow Grave* case study illustrates, a commission could simply be the result of being in the right place at the right time. The importance of 'luck' and chance meetings are an integral aspect of how creative projects come to fruition in film, a factor which has been noted in interviews conducted with Stephen Woolley, Allon Reich and David Aukin.

Quantifying the success of any institution based on chance encounters is something for which the historian must have a natural aversion, since this is purely

speculative. Thinking through such processes can be seen as counter-productive, but ignoring them equally so, if only because we must recognise that the success of any production company is based on a shrewd business strategy but also on a complex network of relationships and a certain amount of luck. The idea of luck, of simply being in the right place at the right time, is something that is often missing from academic work on the film industry, because this is an extremely difficult idea to couch in academic terms. However, as this thesis has illustrated through case studies of films like *The Crying Game*, *Shallow Grave* and companies like Working Title, risk, luck and chance meetings with informal contacts are absolutely integral to filmmaking. This idea does need to be qualified somewhat, however. For example, David Aukin's anecdote of being slipped the script for *Shallow Grave* by his driver and then reading it out of boredom on a flight to London is the kind of story told in hindsight to add to the mystique around an unexpected hit. More often, there are many underlying reasons why films come together in a 'cottage' industry without a stable financial infrastructure. To illustrate, Stephen Woolley's success in drawing together finance for *The Crying Game* was less about chance than dogged persistence, a necessary skill in the arsenal of a film producer. Nevertheless, these ideas are perhaps worth consideration.

In light of this, it might be useful to offer some insight into how informal relationships function within the British film industry. The work of Helen Blair on employment in the industry, as well as the work of Bahar Durmaz and Ivan Turok on geographical clusters, can provide some interesting perspectives here. In the film industry, informal networks often arise from companies and filmmakers working in close proximity to one another – as Turok in particular notes in his work on creative clusters in film and television.<sup>55</sup> The Channel 4 commissioning process did not in

theory necessitate the need for talent and companies to group in a specific location. The Channel did not make programmes in-house, commissioning them from around the UK. Thus, the Channel did not have a need for a close talent-base or 'pool' of resources. However, throughout the course of this research and based on interviews with Commissioning Editors, it has become clear that the commissioning process only represented part of the methods through which film projects originated. Indeed, location was certainly important to the film companies with which the Channel forged relationships.

Film production companies, large and small, have historically clustered around the Soho area. According to Dumaz, based on empirical research through interviewing producers at these companies, a network of relationships is essential to the British film industry:<sup>56</sup>

Interviewees see the advantages of Soho in terms of proximity, diversity and a 24/7 city where 'everything co-exists, everybody is here, and everything is happening here'. On the other hand, they also see some disadvantages of Soho as a location, including congestion, high rents, parking and transportation and accommodation issues including ventilation, heating, inflexibility and inadequate space.<sup>57</sup>

Durmaz's research showed that close proximity to bars, cafes and places where informal creative discussions can take place are also important to producers:

Both Istanbul and London respondents say that the city's cosmopolitan structure and diversity made them feel more creative and inspired. They like to be in touch with other creative people that motivate them. Interviewees say that they like being in the city centre where they have the opportunity to go to cafes, bars, cinemas.<sup>58</sup>

Informal discussions and meetings could potentially provide the basis for long-term projects. For example, it was while Palace's Stephen Woolley was in a Tavern in

Soho that he overheard Tim Bevan talking about a potential deal with the Dutch banking firm Pierson Heldring and Pierson. Following this discussion, Woolley set about making a funding deal with the company himself.<sup>59</sup> Furthermore, research has shown that informal networking is important at all levels of film and television production. Research undertaken by Helen Blair in 1999 found that this was essential to technical film workers. For example, interviews with employees working on a film production showed that 54% had heard about their current job informally from friends or family, 17% from contacting companies directly and just 8% from advertisements. Over half had secured their first ever film or TV job through personal recommendation.<sup>60</sup> Clusters of companies and talent provide networks of informal relationships, which lead on to other projects. For David Aukin, in many ways a mediator between the film and television industries, it was important to be close to this creative filmmaking centre.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter drew ideas from a number of disciplines in order to address issues relating to creativity, autonomy, and the importance of personality in broadcasting and film.

Utilising a number of conceptual ideas taken from literature on the creative industries, this chapter looked at the changing broadcasting ecology of Channel 4 and the role of Film on Four in this environment. It found that, though Channel 4 gradually became more commercial and professionalised from the early 1990s, and whilst many Film on Four productions were commissioned with more of an eye to distribution, Film on Four continued to enjoy a level of autonomy and economic protection within the Channel.

This chapter also looked at the effectiveness of Channel 4's short film strand, Short and Curlies (1987-1995) in finding and supporting new filmmaking talent, and found that, although supporting new talent

was a firm part of Film on Four policy since 1982, talent finding initiatives were less important than the contacts and relationships they generated, with few directors and writers actually moving on to work on Film on Four productions. This short study highlighted the importance of relationships and informal networks in filmmaking, and argued that this could be area in which further scholarship should be undertaken.

This chapter also looked at the role of Film on Four in mediating between the film and television industries, offering insights into the ways in which David Aukin and his team worked with filmmakers while negotiating the broadcasting environment. The case study of *Shallow Grave* argued that, though Aukin could often get involved editorially, he created a space for Boyle, McDonald and Hodge to realise their ideas, and could also protect the interests of filmmakers in the face of disagreements with other co-production partners (as with the example of *Trainspotting*). This case study also shows how the success of individual productions like *Shallow Grave* could strengthen the position of Film on Four within the Channel and directly influence policy. Indeed, this film might be seen as the first in a series of productions which caused Channel 4 to re-evaluate the importance of its identity as a funder of British film. The theme of the final part of this thesis will be 'Identity and Perception', and Chapter 5 will move away from issues of production to look at the marketing, distribution, and exhibition of Films on Four in international markets.

## **Part Three**

### **Identity and Perception**

## Chapter 5

### Channel 4 films in Europe and the USA

#### Introduction

Across Britain, Europe and the USA, the 1980s and 1990s brought an increase in co-productions, an increase in television funding, the emergence of the art-house/crossover film and the growth of transnationalism.<sup>1</sup> Of course, from its inception film has always been 'transnational' in the sense that films have been made for audiences other than the domestic, and also by the fact that production, distribution and exhibition have, from the earliest days of filmmaking, transcended national boundaries. But in the late 1980s, early 1990s, with a rise in European co-productions, the growth of the independent sector in the US and the establishment of greater links between the Europe and the American 'indie' sector, assigning fixed identities to national cinemas became increasingly problematic. Any study of the influence of Channel 4 films on British film culture must therefore necessarily take into account how these films have travelled and impacted upon other cinemas. As film travels, reception by other nations or parts of the world adds its own particular 'stamp' to a production. As Thomas Elsaesser argues,

European films intended for one kind of (national) audience...undergo a sea change as they cross the Atlantic, and on coming back, find themselves bearing the stamp of yet another cultural currency. The same is true of some Hollywood films. What the *auteur* theory saw in them was not what the studios or even the directors 'intended', but this did not stop another generation of American viewers appreciating exactly what the *Cahiers du Cinéma* critics had extracted from them.<sup>2</sup>

This chapter will focus on the transnational relationship between British, European and Hollywood film, analysing how Films on Four have been received by different



nations, and how international popularity and reception has changed perceptions of these productions in the UK. It will examine how Channel 4 has helped to define British film for international audiences, and, finally, how notions of national cinema have been shaped by international audiences.

Channel 4 has long had a productive relationship with Europe through its film sponsorship practices, while the Channel also quickly established a firm presence in Europe through participation in film festivals. Participation in festival competitions brought a valuable element of cultural prestige to the Channel (a fact which was continually emphasised in the Channel's own annual reports and press publications), but it also provided an important means of exhibition and exposure for Channel 4-funded films. Through a case study of Ken Loach's *Riff Raff*, this chapter will examine the importance of the festival circuit as an exhibition outlet for Channel 4 films, as well as a means of facilitating co-production deals. A comparison of the performance of *Riff Raff* in Europe and the UK will also provide an insight into how Films on Four were viewed by critics at home and abroad. This chapter will also identify the ways in which the marketing of British films in the US by companies like Miramax influenced perceptions of Channel 4 films in the UK and the US. Channel 4 films like *The Crying Game* and *Trainspotting* 'crossed over' into other markets, helping to define British cinema for international audiences but also defining the canon of British 'national' cinema for UK audiences. This idea will be the form the basis for a case study of *The Crying Game*, which performed badly in the UK but was released in North America to critical acclaim. Finally, this chapter will focus on how Film on Four's sales and marketing practices changed from the late 1980s to the early 2000s due to the Channel's growing relationships with

American and European distribution companies, as well as the increased attention placed on branding in the new commercial era of the 1990s.

### **Film on Four/Film Four International's relationship with Europe**

Channel 4's involvement in supporting European film production is widely seen to have begun with David Rose's agreement to fund the Wim Wenders' film *Paris, Texas* in 1984, though the Channel was involved in co-productions with other European companies and broadcasters from its beginnings. For example, in 1982 the Channel made *Bad Hats* (Pascal Ortega) with TF1 films and Les Productions Adiuvisuales, and in 1984 also funded *Flight to Berlin* (Chris Petit) with the German Federal republic. It is true that the Fiction department's interest in European film intensified throughout the 1980s, in part due to the industrial and economic difficulties discussed in Chapter 3. However, it was rare for the Channel to offer more than the pre-buying of television rights for a European co-production; for example, both *Paris, Texas* and *The Sacrifice* (Andrei Tarkovski, 1986) were funded in this way. Co-productions could be screened on Film on Four strand, or shown on the Film on Four International strand, which was introduced in 1986 to showcase the Channel's involvement with international cinema. Film on Four International was usually used to showcase productions where the Channel had invested small amounts, or completion money, for a production. The Channel 4 Press Information Packs usually make clear that though many of these films received money from the Channel at the pre-production stage, the Channel could not usually claim that they were, like Films on Four, produced or co-produced by the Channel.

The interest of Film Four International in showcasing and selling films at European markets and film festivals also increased in this era. FFI was created in

1983 as part of Channel 4 International and was responsible for managing the rights to films funded by the Channel. It was also responsible for selling those films to domestic and international distributors (where the Channel had equity and rights to a production). FFI had only a token stall at Cannes in 1983. However, towards the mid-1980s, Channel 4's position as a co-producer of foreign films began to be taken more seriously, as did the potential for festivals like Cannes to increase sales of Channel 4-funded films. This had much to do with changes in attitudes at Film Four International. For example, when Carole Meyer took over as head of FFI in 1984, bringing her experience as a former member of the BFI production board, she focused more closely on the international sales aspect of the company. In 1986, *Variety* noted that Channel 4 were taking films to Cannes that seemed more mainstream in appeal, like *The Supergrass* (Peter Richardson, 1985) *Heavenly Pursuits* and *Eat the Peach* (Peter Ormrod, 1986), which seemed to be aimed at a wider market than a film like *Letter to Brezhnev*. The result was, according to *Variety*, that FFI was gaining more credibility at Cannes than ever before.<sup>3</sup>

In 1986, FFI pitched 13 films at Cannes, double what they were promoting in 1985. Meyer stated that 'we work on the principle that 50 percent of a picture's budget should be covered by advances.'<sup>4</sup> Ten percent of films screened at Venice film festival in this year also involved Channel 4, with the Channel providing the completion money for that year's Golden Lion winner *Sans Toit Ni Loi* (Agnes Varda, 1986).<sup>5</sup> FFI was beginning to realise the importance of the festival circuit to the success of Films on Four in Europe. The sales arm of Channel 4 films would also begin to operate more according to the dictates of the sales and festival circuits. For example, the appropriate festival would be selected for the appropriate film, the film would be entered for selection, and the production would need to be completed in

time to be showcased at said festival.<sup>6</sup> Production and post-production deadlines for the slate of films funded by Channel 4 in a given year would be chosen according to the festival calendar. FFI also began to have more of a presence at sales festival MIFED, as well as selecting films at pre-production and production stage to be pre-sold at business festivals like Cannes. As the following case study will illustrate, festivals operate as an alternative exhibition network for films which might not be seen elsewhere, and serve as exhibition outlets and launch pads for new talent.<sup>7</sup> They also facilitate relationships between film financiers and filmmakers, and, because of the international dimension, they can attract international investors, leading to co-productions.<sup>8</sup>

#### **Case Study: *Riff Raff* and the importance of the European film festival circuit**

This case study will demonstrate that the success of *Films on Four* on the European festival circuit not only widened the appeal of British film to a European audience, but also gained greater recognition for, and changed perceptions of, British film at home. Drawing upon Pierre Bourdieu's concept of symbolic capital and utilizing the work of Thomas Elsaesser and Marijke de Valck on the 'value adding process' inherent in the international film festival circuit, this case study will focus on Ken Loach's *Riff Raff*, a low-budget, made-for-television film which secured distribution in the UK only after it had won the FILPRESCI prize at Cannes in 1991.<sup>9</sup> It will also examine how cultural consecration through 'value addition' changed perspectives towards *Riff Raff* at home and abroad, charting the transformation of a small-scale film for television into a widely acclaimed art-house hit, while also analysing the ways in which that transformation highlighted serious inefficiencies in the British film industry. Lastly, this study will look more broadly at the performance of

Loach's films in Europe, and will argue that the festival circuit has been essential to the international success of his productions, and of Films on Four in general.

Film festivals are not insular – they operate within a complex global network which is hierarchically divided. The influence of a festival depends on its status.

There are 'A', or top rated, festivals (Cannes, Venice, Berlin) and 'B', second rated festivals (this is policed by the Paris-based organization, the International Federation of Film Producers Associations, or FIAPF).<sup>10</sup> Festivals compete with each other for key dates, films and audiences, but they also compete along the same axes; they resemble each other in their internal organisation, while differentiating themselves in terms of their programming and the image they seek to present. FIAPF must also ensure that each festival sequentially follows the other in the festival calendar, allowing filmmakers and journalists to travel the circuit.<sup>11</sup>

This chapter cannot attempt to do justice to the complexities of the international film festival network and the subtle hierarchies within it, but these studies have been comprehensively undertaken elsewhere by Daniel Dayan, Marijke de Valck and Julian Stringer, among others. Rather, for the purposes of this study, it is important to note the role that film festivals play in consecrating elements such as authorship, production, distribution, exhibition and cultural prestige. Elsaesser argues that one of their key functions is to 'categorize, classify, sort and sift the world's annual film-production . . . supporting, selecting, celebrating and rewarding – in short, (by) adding value and cultural capital.'<sup>12</sup> The festival network is thus a key power-grid in the global film industry, affecting production, distribution, exhibition and taste.

An important aspect of the circuit is ‘value addition’. A film can gain cultural value in the form of awards at a festival, and this can translate into economic value in the form of distribution deals. Films can gain further symbolic capital as they travel along the circuit, achieving something like a ‘snowball’ effect. Valck argues that the value adding process at a festival is characterised through three phases – selection, awards and mediation. Films are selected for the festival by the festival director and/or a committee, judged according to aesthetics, quality and subject and placed within the festival programme. Some films compete with each other for awards, and the winners are selected by a jury, whose decisions will naturally be subject to the ‘buzz’ and press attention created around that film during the festival. The third phase of value addition involves the cultural prestige bestowed on a film at a festival entering media discourse around the world – thus festival value is translated into media value, and this in turn can potentially be translated into economic value through distribution deals, video and DVD deals. At film festivals, then, productions accumulate symbolic capital in the form of publicity, prizes and attention which can lead to widespread media awareness and economic gain, and this, as Elsaesser puts it, is ‘life and death’ to a film.<sup>13</sup>

*Riff Raff* unexpectedly won a prestigious award at an ‘A’ festival, Cannes, and this brought cultural prestige which generated media attention, awards and distribution deals that might otherwise have been difficult to obtain. Throughout the 1970s and 80s, Loach had difficulty attracting finance for his projects (with the exception of his 1986 film *Fatherland*, an international production set both in Germany and the UK and co-funded by Channel 4). However, his career really took off in the 1990s with the international success of films like *Hidden Agenda* (1990), *Riff Raff*, *Raining Stones* (1993) *Ladybird*, *Ladybird* (1994) and *Land and Freedom*

(1995). This success was in large part due to an ongoing relationship with Channel 4 and the forging of new relationships with writers like Jim Allen and Bill Jesse. Loach's partnerships with producers Sally Hibbin and Rebecca O'Brien of Parallax Pictures were also a major factor in raising his profile in this era.<sup>14</sup> *Riff Raff* was a collaboration between Loach and writer Bill Jesse which had started life at Columbia but later moved to Channel 4.<sup>15</sup> The film follows the story of Stevie, a Glaswegian construction worker, and his experiences working on a construction site in London building a block of luxury flats. In characteristic Loach style, the film relies partly on dramatic realism, partly on improvisation, and critiques the worst excesses of Thatcherism while also lamenting the lack of political mobilisation within the British working classes. Following the film's completion, it was refused by every UK distributor but given a short run at the National Film Theatre, where it opened to favourable reviews. Anthony Hayward states that it was producer Sally Hibbin who made an international success of the film after this disappointing start:

We showed it to British distributors and had quite a bad reception. One of them stomped out and said he had had enough of British realism. Then we were invited to the Directors Fortnight at the 1991 Cannes film festival. Channel 4 said they could not afford to send us there because they believed it wouldn't sell. So I told their head of drama, David Aukin, that we had some money left in the budget and asked if we could spend it on getting to Cannes. He said yes, we went and the film received the most extraordinary standing ovation.<sup>16</sup>

At the festival the film took the International Critics' Prize. Following this award, *Riff Raff* gained subsequent accolades at smaller festivals and eventually won Best Film at the European Film Awards of that year, gradually accumulating symbolic value which resulted in distribution deals in countries like France, Germany, Sweden and Finland.<sup>17</sup> After it had sold around Europe, Palace Pictures (a UK company that

had initially turned the film down) decided to release it, although it was too late by this point for the film to achieve its full potential.<sup>18</sup>

The 'buzz' surrounding the film at Cannes in May 1991 generated debate among the media at home. Press discourse predominantly expressed bafflement at the lack of recognition for *Riff Raff* in the UK and saw the attention the film garnered in Europe as indicative of problems within the British film industry. Simon Hattenstone of the *Guardian* stated:

Ken Loach must be a confused man. His Channel 4 comedy *Riff-Raff* was shown at the National Film Theatre, but no distributor was interested in giving it a wider cinema release. Too small-scale, they said. Why pay to watch a story about exploitation of working-class builders when you could be wallowing in another E. M. Forster adaptation? Who would understand all those strange dialects anyway? Well, much of the world, it turns out. Off it went to Cannes, won itself an award and was snapped up by the Germans, Spanish, Italians, French, Israelis and Australians. Astonishingly, even the British have now decided it's worth showing - *Riff-Raff* has been picked up by Palace Pictures for a national release. But why did we have to wait till now?<sup>19</sup>

Shortly after receiving the European Film Award, *Riff Raff* was showing in thirty cinemas in Germany, and seventeen in France, while there were only three prints available in the whole of the UK before Palace decided to release it in the light of its European success. This was evidence, as one commentator noted, 'that it's now well-nigh impossible to find a place in the UK market for even a very good British film.'<sup>20</sup> Lack of appreciation for indigenous film at home was a frequent lament of film critics, but this intensified as a result of the international attention surrounding the film. Other critics noted a natural prejudice towards low-budget features on the part of UK distributors. On April 18 1991 Derek Malcolm reported that *Riff Raff* would shortly be shown at Cannes, where 'there isn't much doubt that it will *be treated as film rather than jumped-up television*' (my emphasis).<sup>21</sup> After entry into the festival,



*Riff Raff* arguably lost its baggage as a realist drama funded by a television broadcaster – by dint of its very selection at the festival gates it automatically became a film by a director already considered an *auteur* in France. Interestingly, in this transformation from television film to feature film, aesthetic considerations were not taken into account; it was festival exhibition and reception that determined *Riff Raff*'s cinematic status, not style.

The failure to distribute the film in the UK had a significant effect on Channel 4, causing executives to re-evaluate the viability of funding films for theatrical release at a time of great uncertainty in the British broadcasting environment.<sup>22</sup> Theatrical release had always been an issue, with many Films on Four receiving very limited art-house distribution. But *Riff Raff* was released in the early 1990s, which was, as has been noted, an economically inopportune moment for the Channel. David Aukin stated in a press interview:

We made a decent movie in Ken Loach's *Riff-Raff* but we couldn't get proper exhibition or distribution for it... so you begin to think, why bother to make films for cinemas at all? Why not make films for TV and cut out the cinemas? If we can't get our films decently distributed, the pressure on me to do so will be enormous. It would be a reversal of Film on 4 policy. But nothing is forever.<sup>23</sup>

Aukin decided that theatrical release would remain a staple of Film on Four's output. But the fact that Channel 4 films had consistently proven that they could be more successful abroad than in the UK remained a source of frustration. The Channel's Chief Executive Michael Grade spoke at the premiere of Peter Chelsom's *Hear My Song* (which also had trouble gaining distribution in the UK) in 1992 and stated that the Channel was 'fed up with being at the mercy of UK distributors after films are completed' and lamented the fact that *Riff Raff* had 'been seen by more people in French cinemas than in British'.<sup>24</sup>

Reliance on festivals and specialised distribution in Europe have also gained Loach a reputation in Britain as being an 'art' director, even though this label has not always been reflective of the content of his work. John Hill argues that Loach's films have become 'art' cinema in the UK, not because of their aesthetics but because they have relied on prizes at European film festivals and specialised international distribution for success.<sup>25</sup> Steve Neale argues that European art cinema relies on certain conventions, its main features being a suppression of action, stress on character and 'a foregrounding of style and authorial enunciation'.<sup>26</sup> However, this is not typical of Loach's work. Rather, he tends to eschew showy stylistic techniques and has always denied that he is an 'artsy' director. Like many of his works, *Riff Raff* relies on genre elements like comedy. It was made using actors with real-life experience, shot in chronological order and semi-observational style, using techniques partly drawn from documentary and classical modes. The *auteur* is also central to art cinema, and Loach has always been considered an *auteur* in Europe (though he frequently denies this, continually emphasising the collective nature of his work). But because of his reliance on film festivals like Cannes (which privileges the *auteur*) and distribution on European art circuits, his productions have always been marketed in Europe as 'Ken Loach films'.<sup>27</sup> Rather than aesthetic considerations, festival prestige and modes of distribution in Europe have largely determined the cultural status of Loach's films in the UK.

Loach's films have suffered from a lack of distribution in Britain, but have usually managed to make at least some money in the UK for two reasons – their low budgets and their viability in international markets. As difficult as it has been to penetrate the industry, European recognition through awards gained at festivals have raised the profile of the director and his films in the UK. More generally, the cultural

capital accumulated through the festival network has been essential to the success of many other Channel 4 funded films. Where it has been difficult to obtain widespread distribution in the UK, film festivals have been important as an international site of exhibition, as a means of generating prestige and validation for the broadcaster's film-funding practices, and as a way of boosting the profile of British film abroad. As well as *Riff Raff*, other British films that can be characterised as 'local' such as Michael Radford's *Another Time, Another Place*, Charles Gormley's *Heavenly Pursuits*, Neil Jordan's *Mona Lisa*, Stephen Frear's *Prick up Your Ears*, David Leland's *Wish you Were Here* and Terence Davies' *Distant Voices, Still Lives* have all accumulated significant cultural capital in the form of awards, at festivals from Cannes to Locarno and Bergamo to Berlin.

To conclude, Channel 4 arguably raised the profile of British film in Europe through its participation in film festivals, but this effect was also reciprocal – the profile of British film could also be boosted in the UK through the value-adding process inherent in the international film festival circuit. *Riff Raff* provides an example of a film which suffered from a lack of interest at home but won substantial acclaim in Europe as a result of its participation in a high-profile festival, which in turn led to recognition in the UK (however limited). *Riff Raff* achieved widespread success in Europe through the value-adding process– the FILPRESCI prize imbued the film with significant cultural capital, the first stage in a cumulative process which translated into distribution deals in countries around the world and culminated in the film winning Best Film at the European Film Awards. The success of *Riff Raff* highlighted problems inherent in the British film industry, but it also highlighted the fact that low-budget socially conscious British films, while struggling to achieve distribution in the UK, could achieve significant success abroad. For Loach's films,

and for Channel 4 films in general, the festival circuit was key to that success. At the same time, the burgeoning independent sector in the US was giving opportunities to companies like Miramax, and the Channel's partnership with the Weinstein brothers and other smaller indie companies throughout the 1990s would truly bring Channel 4 films into larger international markets.

### **Channel 4 and the American independent sector**

In the 1980s, independent companies were beginning to build an identity in the US, and many of the films they distributed were British and European. *Kiss of the Spider Woman* (Hector Babenco, 1985) grossed \$17m for Island, *A Room with a View* grossed \$23m for Cinecom, while *Sid and Nancy* and the Channel 4 funded films *My Beautiful Laundrette* and *Mona Lisa* also enjoyed strong box office ratings.<sup>28</sup> Martin

Dale notes roughly three types of indie distributors in the US in the early 1990s.

Mini Majors - larger distributors with an eye to the 'crossover' market, like New

Line, Miramax and Gramercy (set up in a joint venture between Polygram and

Universal in 1993); Classic Indies, which comprised the core of the art-house

market, typically releasing on around 400-500 screens, and making up around 3% of

the market; and Micro-Indies, companies which would release on a tiny number of

screens and expect to gross around \$0.5m per picture. There were between fifteen

and twenty of these companies, usually with close links to the festival circuit.<sup>29</sup>

Dale also notes a shift in foreign sales, which were once dominated by Europe,

particularly by France and Italy, but by the early 1990s began to revolve mainly

around the American independent market. In the early 1990s, the US provided

around 120 new films for sale per year, while Britain provided around thirty, France

fifty-five, and others around fifteen-twenty.<sup>30</sup> In terms of buyers for US product,

59% of sales were made in Europe, and 35% in Asia. Buyers could vary from

national majors, mini majors (niche, crossover) and small, prestige art-house distributors. Large US majors tended to keep foreign rights, whereas before 'empire building' they tended to sell them.<sup>31</sup>

Sarah Street notes that the key to the success of British films in the US has been effective distribution. Sometimes, effective US distribution has also been the key to the success of films in the UK. *The Crying Game*, which did extremely well in the US after failing to draw in audiences in Britain, set a precedent for producers, who realised that it might be more advantageous to release films in the US first, as American success could influence UK audiences. For this reason, *The Madness of King George* and *Four Weddings and a Funeral* both opened in America before being released domestically. Relationships with American companies, the aggressive marketing techniques of Miramax and increased recognition of the value of the US festival circuit for launching independent films all contributed to the success of British films in the US in the 1990s. Festivals like Sundance, Cannes, Venice, Toronto, New York and London were used to build vital press coverage for a film. However, US majors rarely capitalised upon the festival circuit, preferring to focus on the most important event of the film year – the Academy Award ceremonies in March.<sup>32</sup>

As we shall see, the rise of Miramax was synonymous with the rise of the American independent sector, and this company had a longstanding relationship with Channel 4 throughout the 1990s. Miramax picked up many Film on Four titles for American distribution, and even entered into co-productions with the Channel. For example, *True Blue* (Ferdinand Fairfax, 1996) and *The Woodlanders* (Phil Agland, 1997) were picked up by Miramax at Cannes for North American distribution, while Miramax and Channel 4 co-funded Michael Winterbottom's *Sarajevo* (1997) and

Todd Hayne's *Velvet Goldmine* (1998). Miramax also picked up *Trainspotting* and *East is East* for distribution, to varying success. The following case study will look at Miramax's distribution of *The Crying Game* in North America in order to offer some insights into the marketing and reception of Films on Four abroad, and the 'sea change' these films can undergo as they cross the Atlantic and come back, as Elsaesser argues, 'bearing the stamp of yet another cultural currency'.<sup>33</sup>

### **Case Study: *The Crying Game* and the rise of Miramax**

Prior to the international success of films like *Four Weddings and a Funeral*, *The Madness of King George* and *Trainspotting*, *The Crying Game* was Film on Four's first truly global hit. While the growing international appeal of Films on Four in the 1990s had much to do with the editorial decisions of David Aukin in funding a greater variety of product, the establishment of relationships with growing production and distribution outfits like PolyGram Filmed Entertainment and Miramax was also crucial. Though Miramax was becoming a contender in the American independent market by the late 1980s, *The Crying Game* afforded the company a major breakthrough success, a success which arguably had a significant impact on the growth of the independent sector in the USA, and gained the company an important foothold in Europe. This case study will examine how *The Crying Game*, through Miramax's distinctive marketing techniques, was transformed from a low-budget British film part-funded by television into a sensationalist thriller appreciated by American audiences for both its distinctive artistic merit and controversial sexual themes. An analysis of the critical reception of *The Crying Game* in North America also reveals how, as one of the first globally successful indie art-house/cross-over productions, the film not only helped to define low-budget

British cinema for American audiences but also came to represent a direct challenge to the global cultural hegemony of Hollywood.

Harvey and Bob Weinstein set up Miramax in their Manhattan apartment in 1980, naming the company after their parents, Miriam and Max. The Weinstein's were initially inspired by the business practices of British company Palace in their marketing and distribution of films such as *The Evil Dead* and *Diva* and sought to emulate their approach. The brothers would typically acquire cheap, low-budget British and European films which had a certain cultural prestige and re-package these for American audiences.<sup>34</sup> In the late 1980s Miramax gradually moved from acquiring foreign films to making low-budget co-productions. The Weinsteins also sought to trade on their cultural cachet, working to accumulate a library of specialist titles by well-known directors, thereby endearing them to critics, niche audiences and art-house exhibitors.<sup>35</sup> They sought to make commercial films with elements of exploitation but at the same time garner some measure of cultural and artistic respectability, walking the fine line between cultural integrity and commercial success.<sup>36</sup> They would actively find a market for art-house films, and if there was no market, they would create one through a number of clever advertising techniques. For filmmaking, Miramax would come to typify what Bourdieu argues in *The Field of Cultural Production*, that the 'ideology of creation, which makes the author the first and last source of the value of his creation' serves to hide the fact that the businessmen has to exploit this 'sacred' work by finding a market for it, and by bringing it to the public, thus consecrating 'a product which he has "discovered" and which would otherwise remain a natural resource.'<sup>37</sup>

The company had their first major success with Stephen Soderbergh's *Sex, Lies and Videotape* in 1989. The film won the *Palm D'or* at Cannes and went on to

gross \$25m in the US, the highest grossing indie picture in box office history.<sup>38</sup> Miramax continued to shatter the indie ceiling with the success of *The Crying Game* (which took \$63m) and later with Quentin Tarantino's *Pulp Fiction* (which took \$100m in 1994). With *Sex Lies*, Miramax extended a strategy that they had used on the Palace co-production *Scandal*. The company heavily emphasised the 'sex' aspect in their marketing campaign, and, after screening the production in a limited number of art-house cinemas, they gradually widened its release to around 500-600 screens, many of which did not usually show art-house films.<sup>39</sup> Berra argues that *Sex, Lies and Videotape* fully established the characteristic Miramax formula; acquiring a film by an established filmmaker or by a rising talent, exposing it at a festival and giving it a limited distribution aimed at smaller, niche markets followed by a wider release and gradual cross-over into the mainstream market.<sup>40</sup> The company also sought to boost the profile of their films through opportunistic publicity stunts cleverly engineered for maximum impact, as they could not afford to spend the money needed for the kinds of saturation marketing campaigns run by the major studios. For example, Christine Keeler was asked to accompany lead actress Joanne Whalley-Kilmer on the interview circuit when promoting *Scandal*, while the company also pressured Daniel Day Lewis to testify in congress about his role as a cerebral-palsy sufferer in *My Left Foot* (Jim Sheridan, 1989) on behalf of the Americans With Disabilities Act (1990).<sup>41</sup>

Following this bold beginning, Miramax faced a series of flops in 1991-2, with films like *Close to Eden* (Nikita Mikhalkov, 1991), *Map of the Human Heart* and *Tom and Jerry* (Phil Roman, 1992). There were also rumours that the company was facing a cash crisis, rumours which were given further fuel when they accepted a cash advance of \$5m from Rank in 1992.<sup>42</sup> *The Crying Game* pulled the company



back from the brink, and its unprecedented success brought Miramax to the attention of Disney. The Weinstens sold the company to Disney in 1993 for \$80m, and began operations as the subsidiary of a major studio with the autonomy to greenlight any film up to the amount of \$12m. Miramax is widely credited with the creation of 'Indiewood', a term that became common in the mid 1990s and denoted a company seen to be somewhere between a small independent and a major studio, or the subsidiary of major studio created for the purpose of producing less commercial films (such as Fox Searchlight, or Sony Pictures Classics).<sup>43</sup> By buying growing independent companies as subsidiaries, James English suggests that major studios sought to buy into the cultural currency of the independents, seeking to be involved with work that was seen as challenging in order to appeal to audiences which sought to define themselves against more mainstream Hollywood fare. Such companies could be characterised positively, as existing at the edges of Hollywood, or negatively, as selling out to the studios. However, John Berra argues that even though Miramax operated under a major studio, they continued to trade on their outsider 'indie' status while also effectively being part of the system.<sup>44</sup>

Following the production of *The Crying Game*, Stephen Woolley and Nik Powell decided to screen the film to the larger indie studios before showcasing it to smaller art-house distributors, and the Weinstens picked up the film for £1.5m, buying out other investors in order to 'expand into a thousand theatres' and keep the profits if the film was successful.<sup>45</sup> Channel 4 agreed to be bought out, but added a 'kicker' to the deal which meant that if the film grossed a certain amount (in this case, \$50m) the Channel would receive their share in accordance with their equity investment.<sup>46</sup> Aukin said that Miramax 'understands that what makes our movies

distinct in the US is that they are not American, they are UK movies. It is prepared to make them as such.<sup>47</sup>

In the US the *The Crying Game* first appeared at the Telluride film festival in October 1992 to rave reviews.<sup>48</sup> Miramax engineered a marketing campaign which soon gained notoriety. As they had done with *Sex, Lies and Videotape*, the company emphasised the thriller/action aspects in their promotion of the film, with posters using the a noir-esque image of Miranda Richardson with her blunt bob as the femme fatale, holding a smoking gun against a black background (it was, interestingly, similar to the 1994 posters for *Pulp Fiction*). The crux of their campaign revolved around audiences keeping the 'secret' of the protagonist Dil's true identity as a transgender woman. At the Telluride film festival, and at subsequent festival and media screenings, Miramax emphatically asked the press not to give away the plot twist, a request which the US critics almost unanimously received with enthusiasm. Fortunately, the need to keep the secret was impressed upon the audience by the critics and by the publicity for the film, which used the tagline 'the movie everyone is watching, but nobody is giving away its secrets.'<sup>49</sup> According to telephone research carried out by the company, 75% of the audience were still unaware of the plot twist by February 1993.<sup>50</sup>

James English suggests that Academy Awards are the best instruments for converting cultural prestige into capital.<sup>51</sup> Indeed, the film showed an expected jump in business following six Oscar nominations, and Miramax strategically increased the number of screens the film was showing on from 255 to 735, with Miramax SVP Gerry Rich stating that 'the numbers show that Oscar nominations made the movie very accessible for a mainstream audience.'<sup>52</sup> There was already a 'buzz' about *The Crying Game*, which had been showing for thirteen weeks and sold out in many

theatres, but the Oscar nominations undoubtedly fanned this popularity and were a big factor in bringing the film to the attention of the US filmmaking establishment.



This 1992 poster for the film serves as a typical example of Miramax's marketing strategies. The highly stylised noir-inspired image of Miranda Richardson (whose character has a supporting, not a leading, role in the film) holding a smoking gun against a black background with the tagline 'Sex. Murder. Betrayal' shows how Miramax successfully re-packaged low-budget European films for a mainstream American audience.<sup>53</sup>

The film had been released earlier in the UK, to generally good reviews.<sup>54</sup> Many critics decided to keep the secret of the plot twist upon the film's release, but a few did not. Nigel Andrews of the *Financial Times* gave a lukewarm review in which he stated 'an initially chaste romance begins, disturbed only when the girlfriend (Jaye Davidson) is revealed to be no girl at all.'<sup>55</sup> *The Crying Game* was first released by Mayfair in the UK, where it took just £2m. The film re-opened after it had received the Academy Award nominations and taken over \$50m at the US box office. Its reception in the UK arguably had much to do with the timing and subject matter of the film, which was released at a time when the IRA were stepping up their mainland campaign. The *Daily Telegraph* noted that 'the recent plague of bombs in London will, no doubt, make it harder than usual for British cinema goers to accept the notion of an IRA man with a conscience turned to delicate for the dirty work of terrorism. That, however, is what *The Crying Game* requires us to swallow as its initial premise.'<sup>56</sup> In addition, Stephen Rea's much publicised relationship with former IRA activist Dolours Price may also have affected the popularity of the film. In 1973, the Price sisters were arrested for their part in the car bombings which took place outside the Old Bailey and injured 170 people.<sup>57</sup>

Palace criticized distributor Mayfair for not doing justice to the film with its marketing campaign.<sup>58</sup> Woolley also penned indictments of British film critics for refusing to embrace British product, stating that although it had been well-received

in the US, 'no one would write about *The Crying Game* here. As soon as they knew it was about Ireland and mentioned the IRA, they said "forget it"'.<sup>59</sup> Furthermore, the fact that the film was not listed in *The Evening Standard* film awards, despite being partly shot in London, made Woolley feel like he was being 'totally snubbed' by the establishment.<sup>60</sup> Palace's reputation in Wardour Street may also have fed into this - as has been noted earlier in this thesis, the company had a tendency to be widely criticised for their management style and approach to production and distribution.

While a major factor in *The Crying Game*'s success, it is worth considering how far the marketing gimmick of the 'secret' contributed to the profile of the film in the USA. It raised considerable critical awareness across hundreds of US publications, and the complicity of the press in keeping the 'secret' was essential. The *New Yorker* called the film 'an amazing new movie' which halfway through revealed 'a huge, jaw-dropping surprise - a revelation that changes utterly our understanding of everything that has gone before'.<sup>61</sup> Another critic apologised for the ambiguity of his review, stating; 'if I sound vague, it's partly because the film's producers have pleaded with reviewers not to reveal important plot twists, and partly because Mr Jordan's screenplay reveals itself as if it were an onion being peeled.'<sup>62</sup> The *LA Daily News* called Jordan's script 'an extraordinary puzzle piece, and its nature precludes me from revealing key plot developments here (if anybody who sees the movie before you do starts talking about it, immediately cover your ears)'.<sup>63</sup>

However, reviewers also emphasised that the gimmick was not the only reason to see the movie, as 'the big shock is much more than a narrative trick' but rather 'a daring, poetic imagining of what it means never to feel the same about anything again'.<sup>64</sup> Comparisons were drawn between *The Crying Game* and Jordan's earlier work, with the director very much celebrated as an established *auteur*. Indeed,

the film does evoke many of the styles and themes of his earlier work. The first part of the film, set in Ireland, recalls the eerie rural stillness and subtle surrealism of *Angel*, dealing as it does with politics but also with more universal themes. As Fergus (Stephen Rea) tentatively bonds with IRA captive Jody, Jordan weaves in an overall premise questioning the justification of violence and the nature of revenge at the expense of Fergus's own humanity. The second part of the film, set in London, sets a stark contrast, as Fergus is drawn into a relationship with Dil, Jody's ex-lover. Set in a seedy underworld of smoky nightclubs, dilapidated high-rise flats and darkened, rain lashed streets the film recalls the noir aesthetic of *Mona Lisa*, with Jaye Davidson playing the role of an unconventional femme-fatale alongside Miranda Richardson. The film then escalates into tense political thriller while Fergus struggles to come to terms with his sexuality and subverted gender expectations. As well as the celebrated 'twist', the daring shock of this subversion was admired for the way it sought to make viewers actively identify and question the themes of the film. The *New York Times* asserted that 'what makes the film startling, according to numerous critics, is not only its unexpected twists of plot...but also its exploration of the blurred nature of love, trust and compassion and the unpredictability of human emotion.'<sup>65</sup> Another critic celebrated the film's ability to 'alter people's very outlook on race, sex, politics, and other areas of discrimination.'<sup>66</sup>

Indeed, *The Crying Game*'s stylistic difference and ability to alter people's perceptions came to be celebrated against the creative blandness of studio product. The *Orange County Register* noted that 'there's no doubt that *The Crying Game* could never have survived the diluting influence of the American studio system. Everything that's exciting and surprising and meaningful about it would have been 'polished' right out by today's formula driven development process.'<sup>67</sup> In

*Entertainment Weekly*, Jordan asserted that he was glad that the film had been unable to attract studio finance, as the studios 'would have tried to explain away the political background. They would have tried to soften the racial tension. And they would have demanded that the part of Dil be changed in any number of ways. And those different, difficult elements are what make people go see the movie'.<sup>68</sup>

Jordan's more commercial efforts (*High Spirits* [1988] *We're No Angels* [1989]) were also frequently referenced but dismissed out of hand as being studio failures. And if the success of *The Crying Game* exposed the extent to which Hollywood imposes viewer expectations, the validation of the film through its six Academy Award nominations was taken as a sign of the rising independent sector jostling for room in a Hollywood dominated industry.

British films were well-represented at the 1993 Academy Awards - Mike Newell's *Enchanted April* and Merchant-Ivory's *Howards End* (one-fifth financed by Channel 4, who bought the television rights) also received several nominations. However, they were seen by critics less as British films and more as 'indie' films, with their overwhelming presence at the awards in some cases elevated to the status of a *coup*. Some critics speculated about the change behind this turn of events, questioning whether the Academy was trying to send a 'message' to Hollywood.<sup>69</sup>

*Howards End*, *Enchanted April* and *The Crying Game* represented an alternative to the usual studio fare. While *Howards End* might be seen as appealing to traditional American tastes in British heritage cinema, *The Crying Game*, a downbeat thriller featuring a female lead who is revealed to be a man, was a startlingly odd choice. It might be possible to view the breakout success and cultural validation of *The Crying Game* by the Academy as symptomatic of wider trends in the American film industry at this time. One reviewer noted that the Academy seemed to have voted against 'the

tyranny of the box office', as none of the films nominated had grossed over \$100m in 1992. In the run-up to the awards, 5000 makers and marketers of film were typically selected to vote (anonymously) for the films to be nominated for that year. There was a feeling that those filmmakers had 'scorned a system whereby a new release has to be a hit in its first weekend or find itself consigned to an early video grave'.<sup>70</sup> The independent sector had carved out an identity in the 1980s and, buoyed by Miramax's breakout success, were beginning to establish themselves in the early 1990s. By selecting independent films, the Academy was perceived to be embracing the growing indie sector and breaking the stranglehold of Hollywood dominance.

John Berra asserts that in the UK, art and commerce tend not to meet (with the work of filmmakers like Ken Loach and Mike Leigh widely seen as being elitist) whereas the situation in the US independent sector is quite different.<sup>71</sup> Indeed, as John Hill has argued, a combination of factors, such as the Hollywood domination of UK distribution, limited releases on independent circuits and the association of many smaller independent films with European festivals and *auteur* culture has meant that such work has had difficulty garnering a broad appeal in the UK. Charles Morris, owner of the Rex, a small private cinema, argued in the *Guardian* that despite the plugs of reviewers like Derek Malcolm for British films, the cinema still found it extremely difficult to bring in customers. A one night screening of *The Crying Game* in December 1992 attracted just 47 patrons, although Mr Morris noted that 'it was a different story once the Oscar nominations were announced'.<sup>72</sup> The popularity of *The Crying Game* in the US arguably bought the film commercial validation which in turn made it more popular for British audiences. The film had travelled to the US as a low-budget, television funded film (not unlike other low-budget British films given a limited release in the UK market at this time, such as Film on Four's *London Kills*



*Me* [Hanif Kureishi, 1991] and *Wild West* [David Attwood, 1992]). Due to a combination of clever marketing, timing, box office receipts, media publicity and Oscar nominations the film travelled back with a new, more commercial image. *The Crying Game* thus became defined as a significant title in British cinema only by its international success. For British producers and distributors, the film highlighted the prudence of initially releasing a film, not in its home market, but in the US.<sup>73</sup>

Oscar nominations were also good publicity for Film on Four. At the 1993 Academy Awards, Channel 4 funded films won four Oscars, as well as one for best documentary feature. In a press release, Michael Grade stated: 'one Oscar is something to celebrate, but to win 5 is incredible. Channel 4 is very proud to have made these films possible. It is most gratifying to have such acceptance at the highest level internationally. Channel 4's commitment to British cinema remains, and I hope that we can now convince the government that the British film industry is very much alive and on the brink of expansion.'<sup>74</sup> Andrew Higson notes the importance of Oscars in that the validation of such a prestigious award can spill over into the national base. Academy Awards are often much celebrated by the British press, as evidenced by the overwhelming media coverage of films like *Chariots of Fire* (Hugh Hudson, 1981), *Shakespeare in Love* (John Madden, 1998) and *The King's Speech* (Tom Hooper, 2010).<sup>75</sup> A similar celebration can be identified in the press surrounding the 1993 Academy Awards, although it is interesting to note that a large proportion of column space focused mainly on Emma Thompson's nomination and subsequent award for Best Actress in *Howards End*. *Enchanted April* and *The Crying Game* received Oscar coverage, but were usually sidelined towards the bottom of articles, usually positioned underneath large photographs of Thompson (and husband Kenneth Branagh). It is simply interesting to note that the British film

most celebrated was the type of glossy film most exported and consumed by US audiences, and, according to Higson, the most likely to rely on sumptuous *mise en scene* at the expense of engaging with aspects of British political and social life. This suggests that in celebrating the popularity of British film abroad, UK commentators tend (as Nick James has also argued<sup>76</sup>) to defer to perceived American notions of Britishness despite the fact that *The Crying Game* was much publicised across all American media.

It also appeared that even positive publicity could be too much of a good thing. *The Crying Game* received its television transmission on Channel 4 in October 1994, and a study of the film's British reception prior to its television release yields interesting results. Far from welcoming the US success of the film, critics were almost unanimously disparaging, with the film receiving worse reviews than it had upon its initial UK release. If the criticisms are taken at face value, displeasure seemed to centre around the US marketing campaign, which had been extremely prominent in both UK and US media, and played heavily on the plot 'twist'. In the television listings of *The Sunday Times*, George Perry reviewed the film as 'a tense psychological thriller [which] is supplanted by a silly love story with a notorious twist, and Miranda Richardson as a ruthless IRA terrorist is way over the top.'<sup>77</sup> The *Daily Telegraph* said that 'most critics cried with rapture at this low budget hit drama... it's controversial, more than a little nasty, the central gimmick is ludicrous and it's also one of the most overrated movies in years. Can critics really be wrong? Judge for yourself.'<sup>78</sup> Note that the word 'drama' is used here, not 'film', which might suggest that its status as a cinematic production is here denigrated. *The Independent* called it 'overrated'<sup>79</sup> while the TV Times gave the film two stars out of five and was unimpressed by Davidson's Oscar nomination, stating that the actor

was 'almost convincing.'<sup>80</sup> The film's controversial political subject matter was also revisited, with a reviewer from *The Financial Times* provocatively suggesting that the film only did so well in the US because of American ignorance of the political situation in the UK and Ireland: 'Americans confuse America's fight for independence with the activities of Irish terrorists so that the IRA becomes a right-on organisation on their side of the Atlantic'.<sup>81</sup> Thus, while the Hollywood stamp of approval may have boosted the box-office popularity of the film in the UK on its re-release (and gained viewing figures of 8 million upon its Channel 4 premiere), the reaction of the critical establishment was very different, with the film regarded as being too heavily publicised and almost too (strangely, for a television-funded film about the IRA) mainstream.

1997 also saw a record British representation at the Oscars, as four of the five films nominated in the best picture category were made by small independents, and three of the four – *Secrets and Lies* (Mike Leigh, 1996), *The English Patient* and *Shine* (Scott Hicks, 1996) – were British films. An article in the *Observer* stated that the Awards had left Hollywood with a 'bloody nose', while Working Title producer Eric Fellner professed the studios to be 'horrified' by the whole affair. When asked to give a reason for their popularity, David Aukin said that 'focus groups say they [Films on Four] are a pleasure to watch because they have no special effects.'<sup>82</sup> He also stated that 'the industry is now schizoid...there is the Hollywood of the big action movies and big star names, but there are also the independents who make personal films based on character.'<sup>83</sup> By 1997, European cinema was also beginning to claw back box office revenues for the first time in years. Whereas Hollywood films had once constituted 85-95% of the national box office in countries like the UK, Italy and Spain, on average, that figure had dropped to 70%.<sup>84</sup> Furthermore, the

success of small British films like *The Crying Game*, *Four Weddings and a Funeral*, *Trainspotting* and *The Full Monty* in America had prompted Hollywood execs to take a closer look at European film, meaning that the industry was truly becoming more global, ‘even as it begins to cater to more individual cultures’.<sup>85</sup> As one of the first major independent hits and European art-house/mainstream crossover films, the success of *The Crying Game* arguably played a part in facilitating greater production and distribution links between Europe and the USA, and also went some way towards paving the way for the continued challenges of independent film to Hollywood’s economic and cultural hegemony.

In conclusion, the growth of American independent companies like Miramax has been crucial in the distribution and success of Films on Four in the US.

Miramax’s distinctive marketing style led to the rise of the cross-over film, which has been fundamental in enabling small, low-budget British films to make an impact in the American market. *The Crying Game* represented Film on Four’s first major global hit and was also an important benchmark in the growth of the American independent sector as the first indie film to take more than \$60m at the US box office. A study of the critical reception of *The Crying Game* has shown that, for American audiences, low-budget British films could provide a refreshing alternative to mainstream studio productions, and though the film’s notorious marketing ‘gimmick’ was crucial to its widespread appeal, the popularity of the film also suggested willingness to embrace more challenging, stylistically interesting productions on the part of the American industry. This case study has charted the transformation of a low-budget British film into an American indie-crossover hit, and has shown the effect of that transformation on reception in the UK (which was surprisingly negative). Furthermore, the popularity of *The Crying Game* in the US

has also shown that as well as being a crucial cornerstone for independent production and distribution in the UK and Europe, Channel 4-funded films have also been an instrumental factor in the growth of the American independent sector in the 1980s and 1990s. The marketing techniques of US independents and their interest in British product was thus crucial to the success of Channel 4 films abroad, but also, as the following section will argue, to the Channel's own approach to marketing films domestically.

**How the market changed, and FilmFour responded: *Trainspotting* and *East is East*.**

As was briefly mentioned in Chapter 4, in the 1990s the Channel 4 began to make its first forays into film and video distribution. In 1994, FFI started a video label with distributor First Independent, which was mainly intended for rental releases. First Independent already had a 'first look' deal with the Channel whereby the company could opt to distribute Channel 4 films where FFI held the UK theatrical rights.<sup>86</sup>

August 1995 saw the creation of Film Four Distributors. This was originally intended to be a joint venture with the Samuel Goldwyn Company, although the deal fell apart due to financial difficulties. The company was headed by Nick Southworth and handled around 12 films per year, a mixture of third party productions and those with Channel 4 backing.<sup>87</sup> In 1996, FFD also set up its own video rental arm under marketing head Colin Bunch.<sup>88</sup> These moves can be seen as direct precursors to the decision, in 1998, to incorporate the Channel's film production, distribution and video interests into FilmFour, which would be run separately from the main Channel under the leadership of Paul Webster.

Discourse in the British media around this time centred on the fact that British film companies were making films like *The Full Monty* and *Trainspotting* that could be successful abroad but still retain distinctive elements of British culture. Critics like Nick James began to argue that this increased American interest in British product led filmmakers to become deferential to American notions of 'Britishness'.<sup>89</sup> In conjunction with an increase in British production (unprecedented since the 1960s) due to tax breaks and the availability of lottery funding, there was a market for youthful, edgy British cinema. This was spurred on by an increased celebration of 'Brit' music and culture at this time. Of course, many of these films never saw the light of day due to the disparity between production and distribution in the UK. Production may have risen, but problems of distribution and lack of money in marketing films remained unchanged. Many of these films were criticised as shallow, vapid efforts which prioritised style over content in order to appeal to the all-important youth market. They seemed to typify everything that had come to be associated with the shallow and empty idea of 'Cool Britannia' - the celebration of British pop and fashion which was exploited by the Blair government in the late 1990s. *Shallow Grave*, *Trainspotting*, *Lock, Stock and Two Smoking Barrels* (Guy Ritchie, 1998) and *24:7* (Shane Meadows, 1998) gave rise imitators such as *Shopping* (Paul Anderson, 1994), *Love, Honour and Obey* (Dominic Anciano, 2000) and *Gangster no. 1* (Paul McGuigan, 2000).<sup>90</sup> Meanwhile, companies like Miramax and Polygram set about acquiring British product that embodied the magic formula of being just 'local' enough to give a distinctive flavour of British culture, but also 'universal' enough in theme to appeal to American audiences.

PolyGram's UK distribution of *Trainspotting* in 1996 drew on features popularised by American independents such as the 'platform' release and capitalising

on word of mouth following showcases at key festivals. PFE and Rank (distributing in France, Belgium, Spain, Holland and Australia) bought the rights to the film and secured a February 1996 release date. The marketing of the film was to bear a strong resemblance to that of *Shallow Grave*, and the *Shallow Grave* pedigree played heavily in the film's marketing campaign. Polygram spent £850,000 on the promotion of the film, more money than was commonly invested in the marketing of British films domestically.<sup>91</sup> PFE marketing executive Julia Short told *Empire* that because the film was to be released in the UK first, the aim was to have an impact and to be seen as aggressive. PFE relied less on television and radio spots, preferring instead to introduce the film's characters through posters on billboards around the country.<sup>92</sup> According to Chris Bailey, head of PFE's UK theatrical distribution, the campaign was to draw upon the success of *Shallow Grave* and be 'stylish and character-based'.

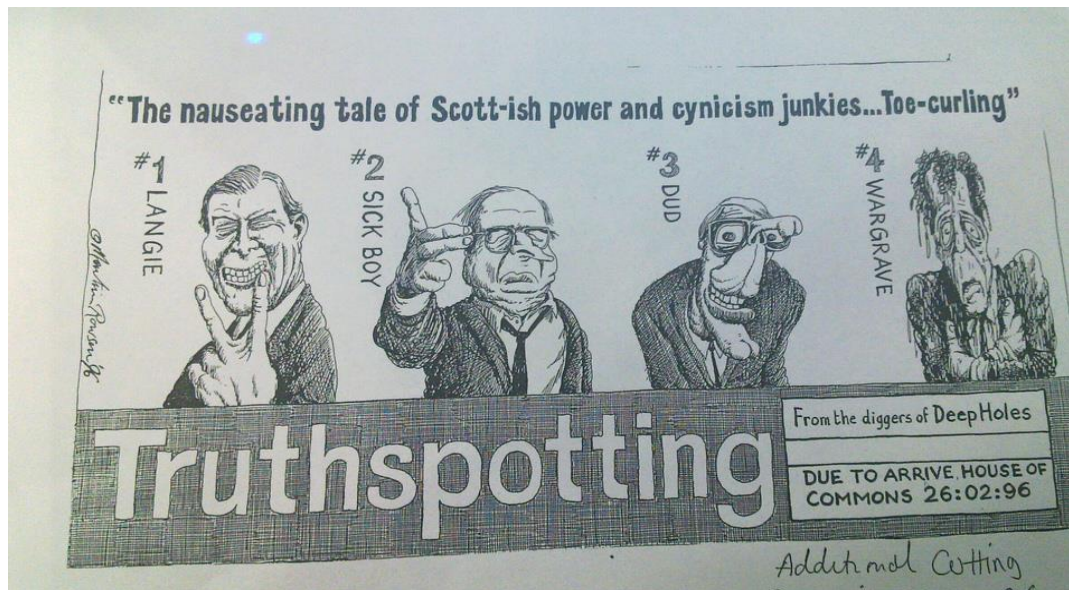
A firm which specialised in designing record covers was hired to design the posters for the *Trainspotting*, signifying the importance of the soundtrack to the film's popularity, and PFE's desire to tap into the 'Brit-pop' audience.<sup>93</sup> The poster campaign was extremely successful, and resulted in spin-off campaigns by companies in various sectors, who attempted to be associated with the film's appeal to young people. Virgin Trains used the poster style in their advertisements, and Reed, an IT company, also used a similar poster with the banner 'Trainerspotting'.<sup>94</sup> The popular influence of the poster was profound, and its cultural cachet was used in everything from retail advertisements to political sketches. MGM video even attempted to cash in on the cult value of the film to generate sales for their re-release of the British cult classic *Withnail & I* (Bruce Robinson, 1987). Like *Shallow Grave*, the film was shown out of competition at Cannes, as a means of showcasing the

production to garner publicity. Hodge, MacDonald and Boyle gave numerous interviews together in the UK and abroad, following the film in its circuit around major territories. Once a small number of people had seen the film, word of mouth grew and this was then fanned by strategic and controlled publicity.



The poster's aesthetic drew upon an album-cover style in order to capitalise on the film's soundtrack which, it was thought, would be popular with young people.<sup>95</sup>





A humorous political cartoon which drew upon the *Trainspotting* campaign in an attempt to tap into the cultural feeling of the times.<sup>96</sup>



MGM's re-release of *Withnail & I* attempted to cash in on the marketing buzz surrounding *Trainspotting* in 1996.<sup>97</sup>

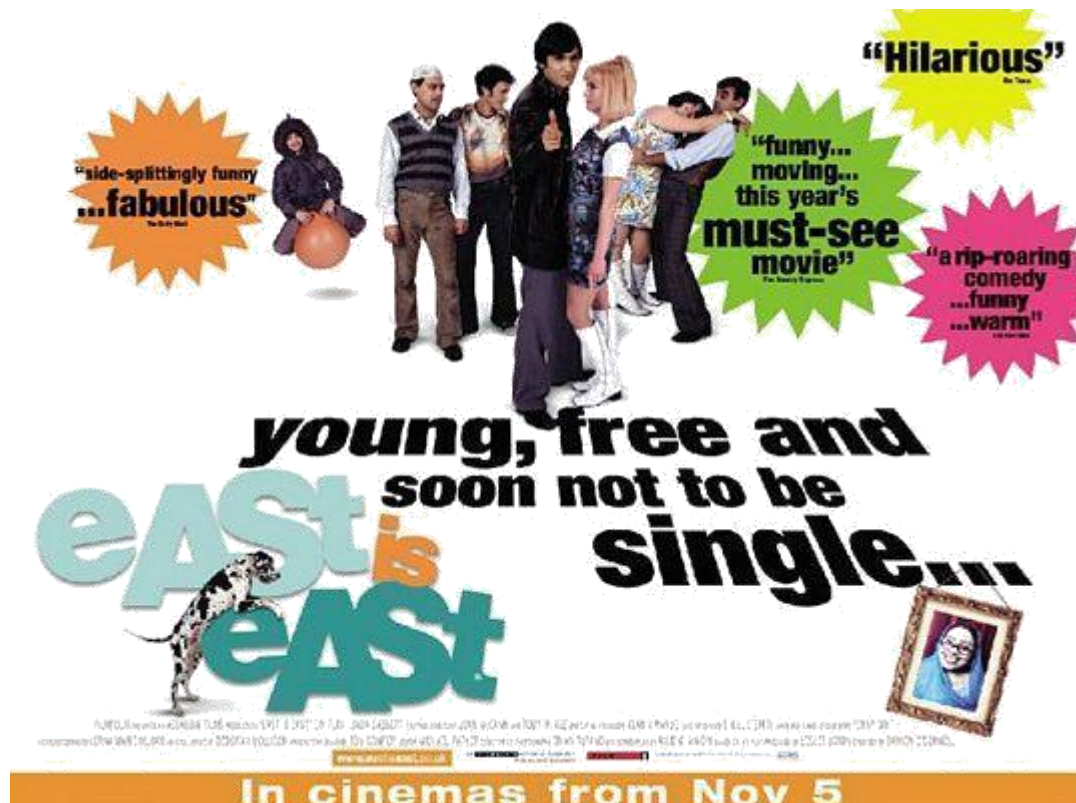
FilmFour's UK marketing campaign for *East is East* followed a similar strategy. The film was originally developed by the BBC and commissioned by David Aukin for Film on Four, and was passed over to FilmFour when the company began in 1998. The new company consisted of FilmFour productions, FilmFour international, FilmFour distribution and FilmFour Lab, and its remit was to operate more along the lines of a traditional film studio. As part of what Channel 4's new Chief Executive Michael Jackson called a 'kill the middle' strategy, FilmFour would support low budget productions (under FilmFour Lab) larger budget British and international productions, and Hollywood studio-type films. The structure of the new business enabled greater integration between production, marketing and distribution. Peter Buckingham, head of FilmFour distribution, said in 1999:

What we have done over the past 12 months is to unify our campaigns a lot more between theatrical, video rental and then retail by literally bringing all the people involved into the same room and making sure they understood how we were marketing the films and making<sup>98</sup> sure they had the information they need when they needed it.

The company would also divert more energy into focusing on the European and North American markets. According to Webster, the North American market was important to FilmFour, but having a film company associated with the European market was also a 'real strength'.<sup>99</sup> Webster, having previously worked for Palace's distribution arm as well as for Miramax, brought distribution into the heart of the decision making process. One can note a strong American presence in FilmFour's slate for 1999/2000 and an increased interest in finding American co-production partners.

The UK release of *East is East* was, in some ways, an important landmark for the industry. For a market seen largely as a 'cottage' industry with a heavy reliance

on companies like Rank for large scale distribution, FilmFour was now operating almost as a mini-studio, overseeing everything from development to distribution. Producers, competitors and trade magazines kept a close eye on FilmFour's marketing strategies for the film. One distributor said 'what FilmFour is doing is very interesting. If successful it will open the way for our films, for what would have been specialist releases, to get much greater exposure.' Teaser posters for the film were released in mid-October 1999, depicting a dog climbing on the *East is East* logo with a caption saying 'The Mutt's Nuts'. This was banned in Ireland because of its 'crudeness'.<sup>100</sup> The main campaign was more conventional, depicting the cast with the tagline 'young, free, and soon not to be single'.<sup>101</sup> With earlier teaser posters designed to capture the younger audience, in this poster one can detect a certain universality of appeal - rather than being an Asian film about a Pakistani family struggling to reconcile traditional culture with British life, this tagline suggested a film about young people and the trials and tribulations of love – a theme to which many can relate. The more traditional ad would feature on 700 Adshell sites and 1500 four-sheet posters, with ads also placed in newspapers from the *Sun* to the *Guardian*.<sup>102</sup> FilmFour decided to opt for the 'platform' approach when releasing the film, initially opening on 72 sites in the UK and Ireland, and then moving wider. At the same time, the FilmFour website featured a virtual dating game to tie in with these promotions.<sup>103</sup> Ads were also shown on television in between programmes like *The Big Breakfast*, *Frasier* and *Friends* to capture the 16-24 audience. The campaign cost \$320,000 per week on average.<sup>104</sup> Instead of making a limited number of prints, 227 were made, unprecedented in the history of a Film on Four/FilmFour production.



The poster campaign for *East is East* focused heavily on the 'universal' themes of the film, and in appealing to youth audiences. The issue of culture clash central to the film has taken a backseat here to an emphasis on being 'young' and looking for love.<sup>105</sup>

The film received a standing ovation at Cannes, after which Miramax's Harvey Weinstein bought it for US release before seeing it. However, the film did not do well in the US, grossing just \$4m.<sup>106</sup> Like *Trainspotting*, for the American release of *East is East*, many lines of the film were also re-dubbed by the actors at the request of Miramax. However, Miramax attempted to play down any cultural elements of the film which may have been confusing to American audiences, whereas with *Trainspotting* they had capitalised on these features. They had turned the perceived cultural disadvantages of *Trainspotting* into gimmicks to draw in audiences. One device was fanning speculation among audiences as to the cultural specificity of the film's title. In an article in *Empire*, David Elmer asked

cinemagoers outside the premier in LA what they thought the word 'Trainspotting' meant. Answers included:

'I think it means the tracks on someone's arms from heroin use.'

'I've heard that it's a game some people play in Scotland.'

'Does it have to do with cleaning up: you know, kicking the heroin?'

'Eh, the train is the rear end of a raptor, a bird of prey.'

'I was thinking more of a woman's ass.'<sup>107</sup>

In this way the difficult cultural translations of certain elements of the film became jocular quirks rather than obstacles.<sup>108</sup>

The Weinsteins were less confident in the handling of *East is East*. 'Our kid', a northern term referring to a family member, was replaced with the character's names, as Americans might mistake the term for a Pakistani name.<sup>109</sup> Certain

British expressions were also changed - for example, 'what the 'eck' was changed to 'what the hell'.<sup>110</sup> Director Damien O'Donnell stated in an interview that he

objected to changing the phrase 'the bin' to 'the trash' as he worried that the film was pandering too much to American audiences.<sup>111</sup> The bewildering nature of the

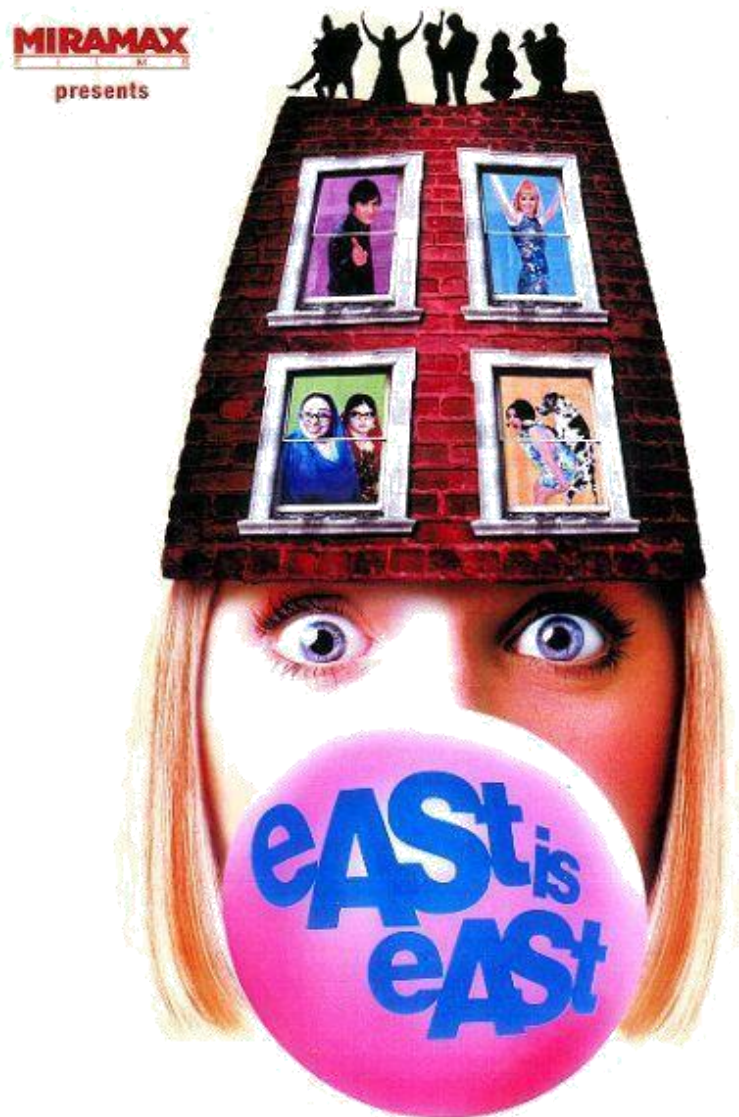
poster used to promote the film may have been a factor in the film's failure to 'cross over'. The Miramax poster for *East is East* featured a blue-eyed blonde girl blowing bubblegum, wearing a tenement building as a hat. More white than Asian characters are depicted in the poster, despite the mainly Asian cast of the film. Director Damien

O'Donnell, questioned about the racial element of the poster by the *Washington Post*, simply said 'I don't know what that's all about'.<sup>112</sup> Reactions to the film at the

Washington International Film Festival were positive,<sup>113</sup> but *Associated Press* noted that the appeal of the film in the UK didn't quite translate to American audiences:

The script could have used another draft. The subplots aren't developed and the father's character especially feels underwritten, abruptly changing from amiable grouch to hateful tyrant. Puri, playing a confused, desperate man, did far better with a similar role in last year's *My Son the Fanatic*.<sup>114</sup>





The Miramax poster for *East is East*. Tariq, the handsome male lead, is pictured posing against a widow, while two white characters, Tariq's girlfriend and her best friend (who are both, at best, marginal to the plot) are also pictured. This poster heavily plays down the racial and cultural elements of the film, perhaps feeling that nuances so central to British life would be lost on American audiences.<sup>115</sup>

It is difficult to isolate the elements of a film which enable it to gain popularity with international audiences. Paul Webster stated that

*Lock, Stock* didn't work [in America] because in an invigorated marketplace the plethora of UK product means some films are only successful in the domestic market because of their specific, local

appeal – whereas the *Full Monty*'s universality of story allowed it to cross over. We think that our upcoming film, *East is East*,<sup>116</sup> has the ability to do that.

However, with *East is East*, American critics and audiences did not have as much to relate to as they did with *Trainspotting*. Though arguably more firmly entrenched in its specific, local culture than *East is East*, the soundtrack and 'Britpop' element of the film was integral to its success.<sup>117</sup> Through the film's link with music and its vibrant, youthful feel, American critics could also draw references between *Trainspotting* and popular British films like *A Hard Day's Night* (Richard Lester, 1964). In the film's stylistic elements and depiction of violence, it could also be compared to films by Tarantino and the Coen brothers, while also harking back to films like *A Clockwork Orange*. As we have seen, then, the cross-cultural appeal of a film can depend upon a combination of shrewd marketing strategies, the types of films available to audiences at the time of release, universality of story/theme and the film's relationship with the popular culture of that era.

*East is East* was received very well in the UK, although some criticisms of the film indicate that Film Four was still struggling to shake off its image as being part of a television broadcaster. The *Turriff Advertiser* said that the film was 'more telly/video fare than big screen, but there are fine performances from all the cast, a fair sparkling of humorous one liners...'<sup>118</sup> while the *Sun* noted that it was 'the sort of British film that is destined to turn up on Channel 4 telly after doing award winning business at some snooty film festivals.'<sup>119</sup> *Trainspotting*, on the other hand, was seldom confused with television, perhaps due to the more surreal and stylistic elements of the film, and the popularity of the soundtrack.

The success of *East is East* led to an increase in media discourse around the Asian experience in Britain, with attention drawn to Asian theatre productions (*East*



*is East* started life as a play), the contentious issue of arranged marriages among Asians living in Britain, and the growing number of Asian people moving into television and film. References were drawn to films like *Bhaji on the Beach* and programmes like *Goodness Gracious Me* (1998-2001). At the same time, it was noted that *East is East* also drew heavily on the British New Wave aesthetic, with the *Evening Standard* stating that the film, with its depiction of northern working class British realism and humour, was rooted firmly in the 'comedy of the kitchen sink'.<sup>120</sup> In Britain, the film's marketing campaign aimed at wider universal appeal, while still firmly rooted in British cinematic traditions of social realism and working-class comedy. Despite being commissioned by Film on Four under David Aukin, *East is East* came to be seen as one of the few major successes of FilmFour before it was subsumed by Channel 4 in 2002.

The marketing and reception of these two films shows how the British market had changed by the late 1990s, and how Film Four International (and later, FilmFour) responded to these changes. Following the success of international break-out hits like *The Crying Game* and *Four Weddings and a Funeral*, *Trainspotting* and *East is East* had shown that British films could actually make money in the domestic market. A comparison of these films shows how the market for British films had changed, both at home and abroad. *East is East*, in particular, shows how Channel 4's longstanding relationship with Polygram and Miramax influenced the marketing techniques of FilmFour as a standalone company. An analysis of how *Trainspotting* and *East is East* fared in the American market can also give us an insight into how American critics and audiences responded to these films, and the marketing and promotional campaigns surrounding them.

## Conclusion

This chapter has shown how changing marketing practices came to influence the scope and remit of Channel 4's approach to film, through a study of how Films on Four have travelled to other markets, and how they have been received at home as a result. Channel 4 films have impacted other national cinemas and influenced the reputation of British film abroad, which in turn has also influenced perceptions of Channel 4 films in the UK. As the case study of *The Crying Game* illustrates, through clever marketing a film which barely broke even in the British market could become a global hit, garnering positive reviews and Oscar nominations. The case of *Riff Raff* highlighted the importance of the festival circuit as a site of exhibition for Channel 4 films in Europe, as well as arguing that festival prizes could add symbolic capital to a production, which could in turn translate into distribution deals (crucial in markets dominated by the stranglehold of US distribution companies). But a key theme which has emerged from these two case studies is the extent to which Films on Four continued to be closely associated with television for UK critics. As the studies of critical reception in this chapter have illustrated, Films on Four tended to be branded as small scale productions associated with television, aesthetically and financially. However, this chapter has shown that these films could have different connotations for other national audiences, which was in large part determined by their marketing. For example, on the European festival circuit, *Riff Raff* was seen as a cinema film by an established auteur, whereas in the US, *The Crying Game* was an independent crossover hit, seen to be offering something refreshingly different from the Hollywood studios.

Finally, this chapter has looked at Channel 4's own film distribution practices in the late 1990s. The marketing behind *Trainspotting* shows the influence of the strategies of American independents on the distribution of Films on Four in the UK

in the 1990s, while *East is East* illustrates that, while FilmFour was utilising these strategies to distribute a low-budget film on a large scale for the first time, Miramax, at the same time, could also get it wrong. In comparison to the slate of productions commissioned by FilmFour in 1998/1999, *East is East* was undoubtedly a commission left over from Film on Four under Aukin. A film about the struggles of British Pakistani family living in a working class area in the 1970s presented a stark contrast to the higher budget productions that FilmFour was becoming involved in at this time. A study of the marketing of the film by FilmFour under Paul Webster shows how Channel 4's strategies had changed throughout the 1990s as it attempted to navigate a more competitive environment with a more commercial remit. The following chapter will now turn to examine the historical legacy of Film on Four, and will discuss the construction of that legacy by institutions with (often competing) agendas, as well as looking at the ways in which the Film on Four 'canon' can be subject to revision.

## Chapter 6

### Cultural legacy and canonisation

#### Introduction

The key question uniting the focus of this chapter will be: what has been the *perceived* cultural impact of Channel 4 on British cinema? This chapter will examine media, industrial and institutional perceptions of Film on Four, and will attempt to investigate whether there is an established Film on Four 'canon' of films which are seen as being particularly influential to British film culture. Any analysis of current views regarding Channel 4's impact on British cinema must necessarily take into account all films funded by the Channel, not just those which were produced during the life of Film on Four (1982-1998). This chapter will thus also discuss productions by FilmFour (1998-2002) and Film4 (2003-present). Drawing attention to those films which were well received, but have been forgotten, or were in some way innovative, but lacked critical attention (or distribution) this chapter will also discuss the issues inherent in canonisation, drawing primarily upon the work of Janet Staiger and Jonathan Rosenbaum.<sup>1</sup> For example, why were certain films chosen by peers/institutions in retrospective 'best films' lists, and how far does the inclusion of hitherto forgotten films lead to the exclusion of others, thus perpetuating the cycle? This chapter will also investigate how far contemporaneous consecration (in the form of reviews, awards and box office receipts) influences canon formation, drawing upon the work of Pierre Bourdieu on consecration and Joseph Lampel on the institutional legitimisation of British films.<sup>2</sup> Finally, this chapter will look at the Channel's own corporate identity and its role in shaping the legacy of Film on Four,

and will argue that Channel 4 is engaged in an ongoing process of canonisation, a process which is to some extent driven by its own brand identity.

### **Measuring Cultural Value**

Over the past ten years, the cultural value of film has received much attention, in part due the reports and studies of findings by institutions like the now defunct UK Film Council (UKFC). The 2009 report *Stories We Tell Ourselves* and the 2011 report *Opening Our Eyes* were studies commissioned by the UKFC and the BFI respectively, studies which attempted to measure the cultural impact and value of British film. The methodology for *Stories* involved drawing up a database of 5000 films produced between 1946 and 2006. From this, a sample was taken of 200 random films and 200 films considered to have had lasting impact.<sup>3</sup> 'Impact' was measured in three ways: contemporaneous impact through box office figures and awards, the afterlife of a film in DVD and video markets, and wider impact (e.g. YouTube, IMDb, and social influence). Four other criteria for cultural impact were also considered in the study: censorship and notoriety (for example, the controversy surrounding *A Clockwork Orange* [Stanley Kubrick, 1971]), quotations and references in other media (such as *The Simpsons*), 'zeitgeist moments' where films have captured the spirit of the times (*Bend it Like Beckham* inspiring the creation of an all-girls football team in India, for example) and 'cumulative impact', in terms of the influence of films in changing attitudes over time (the report gives the example of Simon Callow's character Gareth in *Four Weddings and a Funeral* changing attitudes towards the gay community).<sup>4</sup>

Audience research was largely absent from the report however - something that was later rectified with *Opening Our Eyes*, which was published by the British

Film Institute following the 2011 merger of the UKFC with the BFI. This study involved both qualitative and quantitative research methods, and was mainly based on interviews taken from 2,036 respondents aged between fifteen and seventy-four. The study attempted to grapple with issues such as why people watch films, in what ways they value films, and how films contribute to British identity and culture. As such, the study focused more on cultural influence and value rather than on directly measuring 'impact', and dealt more with the ways in which the British public engage with film, while drawing some conclusions regarding the effect film can have on the public imagination.

The research carried out for these initiatives culminated in a number of seminars aimed at promoting a dialogue between academics, policy makers and industry professionals and leading to vigorous discussion around this area. For example, at a seminar to discuss the cultural value of film in 2005, John Ellis argued that, culturally, film can spark discussions and debate, and cited the example of how *Dirty Pretty Things* (Stephen Frears, 2002) highlighted the plight of illegal immigrants in the UK. He suggested three ways in which cultural impact might actually be measured; 'longitudinal ethnographic studies' which would investigate which films were significant to audiences over time; measuring broadcast time and the amount of 'column inches' dedicated to films, and 'assessing critical acclaim'.<sup>5</sup>

But beyond considerations of how film is popularly valued, and its role in contributing to notions of national identity, there are other measures of cultural worth which are more selective. For example, what about the types of culturally valuable films promoted by institutions like the BFI? These include films which are considered artistically important and stylistically innovative or those which deal with pressing social or political issues (for example, the experiences of ethnic minorities

and those living in poverty), but do not find such a ready audience. Sally Hibbin and Karen Alexander have argued for the importance of encouraging under-represented filmmakers to tell their stories, stating that a key problem lies with the audience.<sup>6</sup>

Both have argued for the important role of film education in growing new audiences for specialist films, though they agree that more thought needs to be given to the practicality of such a proposal. As we can see, based on these arguments, cultural 'value' might be considered differently from cultural 'impact'. In simple terms, 'value' involves a judgement which is subjective (the perceived ability of a film to challenge dominant culture, to express an under-represented point of view, to be artistically innovative, for example), while the very definition of the word 'impact' suggests something which is measurable (the ability of a film to win wide audiences, to gain critical acclaim in the form of something as tangibly quantifiable as 'column inches'). Of the two, 'value' is perhaps more difficult to define and ascertain.

The process by which films come to be considered as the best examples of a specific genre (or national cinema) and thus part of an established 'canon' is extremely complex. However, there are identifiable factors which influence the process of canonisation. Which Film4 productions are seen as being worthy, artistic, innovative, or culturally significant depends on views from critics, cultural institutions like the BFI, academics and Channel 4 themselves, and such views depend on a mixture of the cultural and commercial criteria outlined above. It should also be noted here that Channel 4's position as both a public service and commercial broadcaster has, from its inception, sought to balance these cultural and commercial imperatives (sometimes with difficulty). Canon formation can be seen as an ongoing process of negotiation between these forces. But at the heart of canon formation is necessarily selection. According to Janet Staiger:

In purely practical terms, a scholar of cinema cannot study every film ever made. Selection becomes a necessity and with selection usually comes a politics of inclusion and exclusion. Some films are moved to the centre of attention; others to the margins.<sup>7</sup>

Staiger outlines typical rationales for selection and discusses the problems with each.

The first rationale she outlines is 'efficiency'. A movie critic, writer or academic may give the brief example of one well-known and instantly recognisable film in order to briefly illustrate a point. However, the problem is that this can give weight to a particular film as being more important than others of its kind.<sup>8</sup> For example,

academics and critics often pick the popular example of *East is East* when discussing British films which illustrate the experiences of people from different cultures living in the UK. However, Gurinder Chadha's *Bhaji on the Beach* (1993) is less frequently referenced, while films like Po-Chih Leong's *Ping Pong* (1987) and Mike Newell's *Sour Sweet* (1988) are almost never mentioned.

Staiger's second rationale is the idea of 'putting order into chaos', of grouping films from a particular time or dealing with specific themes under one heading (e.g. American Horror or Realist Drama), with a few examples commonly chosen to stand in for the group (for example *A Room With A View* and *Howards End* becoming synonymous with Channel 4's contribution to British heritage drama).<sup>9</sup> The third rationale outlined by Staiger is that of 'evaluative selection', the foregrounding of works which are seen to promote social or public good. It is in this area of canonisation that politics is most keenly involved, as such value judgements are rarely free of 'self-interest and hegemonic influence'.<sup>10</sup>

Ideas about what constitutes the 'best' or 'most influential' types of film thus relies on personal interpretation, institutional politics, the competing agendas of the dominant culture on critical consensus and any number of complex value



judgements. As Christopher Long asks, 'who makes the value judgments, and on what basis do they make those judgments?'<sup>11</sup> What are the criteria for selecting a 'culturally influential' film? When compiling their 'Top 100 British Films' list in 1999, the BFI asked respondents to select films that they perceived to have made a 'strong and lasting impression, broke new ground, set a trend, expressed a particular point of view, found high acclaim, and won wide audiences'.<sup>12</sup> 'Value' has different meanings in different contexts, for consumers, critics, professionals, and academics. Rather than offering firm definitions, it might be more fruitful to investigate perceptions of 'value' by thinking about this question in relation to Film on Four, and its perceived impact on British film culture. It might be more useful to ask: exactly who is making these value judgements, and why? The following section will discuss the BFI's 'Top 100 Films' list and other critics' polls in more detail. The purpose will be to deconstruct the process of film canonisation by press and cultural institutions in order to examine institutional, professional and media views of Film on Four productions.

### **'Top film' lists and the importance of contemporaneous consecration in canon formation**

In 1998, the BFI invited 1,000 people connected with the film industry to choose 100 films that were 'culturally British'. BFI staff initially selected 309 films for respondents to choose from, but other films could also be nominated. Although over 500 additional films were suggested, only two made it into the final list (*A Clockwork Orange* and *Small Faces* [1996]).<sup>13</sup> The list was essentially evaluating those films that were perceived, by experts and industry professionals, to be most culturally significant to British cinema based on the criteria suggested. Where they appear in the list, films funded by Channel 4 can thus be considered as productions

which have helped make the greatest contribution to British cinema, by dint of being selected. However, it is important to bear in mind here that this list is from 1999, and does not include more recent examples. Furthermore, historical lists with a broad timeframe may be less likely to include recent examples in favour of established classics.

In many ways, canonisation is synonymous with retrospective consecration, the process by which institutions confer legitimacy on a symbolic product long after its initial release (as opposed to 'contemporaneous consecration', which relates to acclaim and financial success immediately following release). In *The Field of Cultural Production*, Pierre Bourdieu outlines three types of cultural legitimacy: 'specific' (conferred by peers, or other producers), 'bourgeois' (institutions of the dominant class) and 'popular' (based on public acclaim).<sup>14</sup> In 2009, Joseph Lampel investigated the impact of contemporaneous consecration on retrospective consecration in the British film industry, drawing upon Bourdieu's original definition and applying it to the BFI 'Top 100' list. Lampel outlines three ways in which a film can be contemporaneously consecrated: 'expert', 'peer' and 'market', with 'expert' relating to festivals, 'peer' to industry awards, and 'market' relating to popularity and box office receipts. Lampel's work will be deployed here in order to assess whether contemporaneous consecration in the form of box office figures, festival prizes and industry awards (such as BAFTAs and Academy Awards) affects retrospective consecration, specifically in the case of Film on Four productions.

The following table lists the Channel 4 funded films which appear in the BFI Top 100 list, along with lists of BAFTA awards, box office figures, and festival accolades (reflecting Lampel's criteria). Some conclusions might also be drawn from this table as to how far contemporaneous consecration directly affected the television

viewing figures of Film on Four productions, many of which would have been broadcast on the Channel shortly after their initial theatrical run.

**Table 6.1:** Films with Channel 4 funding from the BFI 'Top 100' list

<b>Film Title (and number on the list)</b>	<b>Percentage of C4 funding</b>	<b>BAFTA (peer)</b>	<b>The 'big three' festivals: Cannes, Venice and Berlin (expert)</b>	<b>Box Office UK [m] (market)</b>	<b>Viewing Figures [m] (first tx)</b>
10. <i>Trainspotting</i>	99%	Best Adapted Screenplay 1996 (John Hodge) Korda award for Outstanding British Film 1996	None	12.4	4.6
23. <i>Four Weddings and a Funeral</i>	30%	Actor in Leading Role (Hugh Grant) Best Supporting Actress (Kristin Scott Thomas) Lean Award for Achievement in Direction (Mike Newell) Best Film in 1995	None	27.7	12.4
26. <i>The Crying Game</i>	33%	Alexander Korda Award for Outstanding British Film 1993	None	2	4.1
40. <i>Secrets and</i>	32%	Actress in a	Cannes:	1.96	2.9

<i>Lies</i>		Leading Role 1997 (Brenda Blethyn) Original Screenplay 1997 (Mike Leigh) Alexander Korda Award 1997	Best Actress (Brenda Blethyn) Palme D'or Prize of the Ecumenical Jury		
42. <i>The Madness of King George</i>	31%	Actor in Leading Role 1996 Alexander Korda Award Make-up and Hair Award (Lisa Westcott)	Cannes: Best Actress (Helen Mirren)	4.6	4.9
50. <i>My Beautiful Laundrette</i>	100%	None	None	0.75	4.3
67. <i>Mona Lisa</i>	15%	Actor in a Leading Role 1987 (Bob Hoskins)	Cannes: Best Actor (Bob Hoskins)	?	7.8
71. <i>Elizabeth</i>	7%	Actress in Leading Role 1999 (Cate Blanchett) Alexander Korda Award Anthony Asquith Award for Film Music Best Cinematography Best Make-up and Hair	Venice: Max Factor Award (Jenny Shircore)	5.5	3.8
73. <i>A Room With a View</i>	10%	Best Actress (Maggie Smith) Supporting	None	2.5	4

		Actress (Judy Dench) Costume Design Best Film Best Production Design			
80. <i>The Draughtsman's Contract</i>	50%	None	None	0.42	2.1
82. <i>Distant Voices, Still Lives</i>	53%	None		0.48	1.2
85. <i>Brassed Off</i>	57%	None	None	3.3	4.9
91. <i>My name is Joe</i>	22%	None	Cannes: Best Actor (Peter Mullan)	0.95	1
93. <i>Caravaggio</i>	54%	None	Berlin: Silver Bear Award	0.24	1.8
95. <i>Life is Sweet</i>		None	None	0.53	3.6

(Sources: John Pym, *Film on Four: A Survey*, Phil Wickham, *Producing the Goods*, BAFTA

awards database: <http://awards.bafta.org/explore> and IMDb: <http://www.imdb.com/year/>)

Given the methodology behind the BFI Top 100 list, what this table shows is the often polarised relationship between peer/professional and institutional/expert consecration. As previously noted, the BFI 100 was voted for by industry professionals, based on an initial list drawn up by staff at the BFI. Lampel argues the BFI 100 was thus likely to be more affected by popular contemporaneous consecration (while the 309 was more likely to be weighted in favour of historical 'classics'), and perhaps the eventual line up of these titles reflects the joint industry-BFI selection processes.<sup>15</sup> For example, there is a distinct demarcation between those populist, profitable films near the top of the list, which seem to correlate closely with critics' 'best films' lists published in the popular press, while lesser known, less

commercially profitable films by established *auteurs* such as Peter Greenaway and Terence Davies can be found further down the table. The films towards the top of the list (the 'most influential') have all won prestigious industry awards, with festival awards seemingly less important: for example, *Four Weddings and Trainspotting* were consecrated professionally and popularly, but not 'expertly' (by cultural institutions).

Conversely, what about films like *My Name is Joe* (Ken Loach, 1998) and *Life is Sweet*, which did not win significant awards at the time of their release but which are listed in the Top 100? Allen and Lincoln argue that films by established 'auteurs' are more likely to be retrospectively consecrated by cultural institutions.<sup>16</sup>

Derek Jarman's *Caravaggio* appears in many 'top films' lists, but did not make significant box office returns and garnered low viewing figures on television broadcast. Indeed, *The Draughtsman's Contract*, *Distant Voices*, *Still Lives* and *My Name is Joe* received very little popular recognition at the time of release, but were made by directors considered to be established *auteurs* and have since been appraised by critics and academics as being artistically and culturally innovative. However, overall, contemporaneous consecration in the form of expert, peer and popular recognition is a significant factor in determining which films will be selected by critics and institutions and thus retain some hold in the public imagination. Retrospective consecration in the form of best films lists goes some way towards determining which films are remembered, cited and studied, and as such the processes behind this consecration are important in assessing which Channel 4 films have been considered to have had an 'impact' on British cinema.

'Best films' lists published in newspapers and film magazines can also provide a good indication of which Channel 4 productions have been seen as being

popular and/or culturally significant. Those films which appear most often in these lists, taken from polls carried out by four popular publications over a period of ten years, are: *A Room with a View*, *Trainspotting*, *Naked* (Mike Leigh, 1993), *Four Weddings and a Funeral*, *Secrets and Lies*, *Sexy Beast* (Jonathan Glazer, 2000), *24 Hour Party People* (Michael Winterbottom, 2002) *28 Days Later* (Danny Boyle, 2002) and *Hunger* (Steve McQueen, 2008). It must be borne in mind that the methodology for film selection varied between each publication. For example, the *Time Out* Top 100 was compiled with suggestions from ‘150 top industry professionals’, while *Total Film* polled suggestions from just 25 critics. Nonetheless, the aggregation of these poll results in the table outlined below gives a useful indication of those Film4 productions considered by critics to have been influential to British cinema. The films here are ranked by most popular first, with the accompanying numbers in this list indicating the position of each film in the original poll.

**Table 6.2:** Culturally influential films with Channel 4 funding selected from four critics’ ‘best British films’ lists<sup>17</sup>

<b><i>Total Film</i> 2004 (Top 50)</b>	<b><i>Empire</i> 2011 (Top 100)</b>	<b><i>Time Out</i> 2012 (Top 100)</b>	<b><i>Telegraph</i> 2013 (Top 50)</b>
4. <i>Trainspotting</i> (1996)	10. <i>Trainspotting</i>	3. <i>Distant Voices, Still Lives</i> (1988)	13. <i>Four Weddings and a Funeral</i> (1994)
10. <i>Naked</i> (1993)	12. <i>This is</i>	10. <i>Trainspotting</i>	34. <i>Naked</i>

	<i>England</i> (2006)		
15. <i>Sexy Beast</i> (2000)	13. <i>Distant Voices, Still Lives</i>	11. <i>Naked</i>	39. <i>Secrets and Lies</i> (1996)
26. <i>A Room With A View</i> (1985)	21. <i>Four Weddings and a Funeral</i>	33. <i>Secrets and Lies</i>	47. <i>Trainspotting</i>
34. <i>Four Weddings and a Funeral</i>	26. <i>Shallow Grave</i> (1994)	48. <i>Hunger</i> (2008)	
45. <i>My Beautiful Laundrette</i> (1985)	37. <i>28 Days Later</i> (2002)	49. <i>Gallivant</i> (1996)	
	44. <i>Sexy Beast</i>	56. <i>Caravaggio</i> (1986)	
	57. <i>My Name is Joe</i> (1998)	72. <i>The Long Day Closes</i> (1992)	
	58. <i>Slumdog Millionaire</i> (2008)	74. <i>Four Weddings and a Funeral</i>	



	62. <i>Secrets and Lies</i>	88. <i>This is England</i>	
	65 <i>Hunger (Steve McQueen)</i>	94. <i>24 Hour Party People</i> (2002)	
	76. <i>Naked</i>	97. <i>28 Days Later</i>	
	83. <i>A Room with a View</i>		
	92. <i>Four Lions</i> (2010)		
	97. <i>24 Hour Party People</i>		

Christopher Long somewhat flippantly suggests that the larger the number of critics participating in a poll, the more likely *Citizen Kane* (Orson Welles, 1941) will poll at number one, suggesting a formula where  $x$  = number of critics, and  $y$  = *Citizen Kane* polling at number one, and the likelihood of  $y$  increases with  $x$ .<sup>18</sup> Such a formula may have a basis in reality, when one considers that the film remained at number one in the *Sight and Sound* Top Ten Greatest Films poll from 1962-2002 (It

was only knocked down to number two in 2012 by Yasujiro Ozu's *Tokyo Story* [1953]). In the conclusion of his book *Essential Cinema*, Jonathan Rosenbaum seeks to rectify problems inherent in canonisation by providing his own list of 1000 greatest films, in an attempt to challenge established consensus. In relation to this, Long argues that:

Consensus only breeds mediocrity or, if you prefer, more consensus...such polls can only produce canons which include the same narrow set of masterpieces time and again. Ask each individual in the group what his top choices will be and you are far more likely to see greater diversity in the results, but the most idiosyncratic results are drowned out by mass consensus.<sup>19</sup>

By this reckoning 'consensus breeds consensus', which results in a diversity of other works languishing in obscurity. An example of this would be the over-citation of *Trainspotting* in critics' polls and academic work, which arguably marginalises the varied film output of Film on Four in the 1990s. By continually focusing on a small selection of 'great' productions, consensus as to the significance of these films grows, and becomes established and entrenched, at the expense of other valuable works.

Press evaluations of Channel 4 films, usually written to coincide with the Channel's milestone anniversaries, have observed this tendency. According to *The Independent's* Sarah Gristwood, writing at the time of Channel 4's fifteenth anniversary in 1997, the list of notable Film on Four productions:

goes on almost indefinitely: *Trainspotting*, *Four Weddings and a Funeral*, *The Madness of King George*, *Secrets and Lies*, *Mona Lisa*, *The Crying Game*, *My Beautiful Laundrette*, *Wish You Were Here*... Of course, besides the famous success stories, their list includes an awful lot of lesser movies, the names of which have passed from memory.<sup>20</sup>

There is a strong trend in the press of equating Channel 4's successes with a handful of films, with repetition abounding in different publications and the same titles being

cited at milestone anniversaries. Nevertheless, as we shall see, the Channel's anniversaries provide a good way of surveying the established film canon and analysing the rationales for film selection by critics. The following section will consider how Channel 4 has defined the identity of Film on Four/FilmFour/Film4 since 1982. Which films does the Channel consider to have had the greatest impact on British cinema? As we shall see, through case studies of third party distribution and on-demand services, the answer to this question depends to a large extent on rights issues and on how Film4 currently seeks to position itself within the marketplace.

### **Corporate identity: what is Film4?**

A report into Channel 4's impact on the UK film industry by Oldsberg SPI, published in 2008, concluded that the Channel makes a unique contribution to UK film by championing the independent producer (supporting companies like Working Title, Warp and DNA) supporting new and established talent (such as Neil Jordan, Peter Greenaway, Danny Boyle and Ken Loach), supporting projects that reflect British culture, and commitment to taking risks, financially and creatively. Significantly, the report also notes that 'in a crowded and fragmented sector, C4 has a clear and distinctive brand ("Film4"), built over a 25 year period of commitment and innovation.'<sup>21</sup> The report states that:

C4 has always had the reputation for discerning, non-mainstream, alternative taste amongst consumers. This reputation contributes to its ability to build audiences around particular types of product. With its multi-platform presence, C4 can play an 'editor of choice' role, directing consumers to recommended films, supporting the promotion of British and specialised films, and catering to today's increasingly fragmented audiences.<sup>22</sup>

The report argues that the Channel 4 brand thus has a direct impact on the film industry and film culture in Britain. Indeed, Channel 4 helps to shape the taste of British audiences through an ongoing process of canonisation, through Film 4oD, Film4.com and well-publicised film seasons on the Film 4 Channel. According to the report, the Channel 4 brand is hugely important to the British film industry because it is widely recognised, and as such it attracts audiences, one of the ‘most significant challenges for producers in the digital age.’<sup>23</sup> By 2012 the Film4 brand was well-established, through television, online and digital platforms. But in the early 1990s, the Channel was slowly becoming aware of brand impact. Film on Four did have an identity from 1982, an identity which was expanded upon through the Film on Four Take Two and Film on Four International slots. The strand was often well-publicised in the Channel's Press Information Packs, which, in addition to synopses and production information also included detailed information regarding awards and critical recognition. But in the early 1990s, the Drama Department began to focus more on brand recognition and audience impact, as evidenced by studies commissioned within the Channel to assess this impact. In 1991, the research department commissioned a report on audience awareness of the Channel's film funding practices. The report found that:

- 1) 56% of the sample claimed they had heard of Film on Four
- 2) 58% of the above sample claimed to have seen a Film on Four production
- 3) Amongst those who had heard of Film on Four and seen at least one of these productions, half realised that these were premieres of cinema films and only a quarter realised that Channel 4 had a hand in producing them.
- 4) The majority of respondents claimed it wouldn't really change their attitude to a cinema to know it was associated with Channel 4.<sup>24</sup>

In October 1992, further research was carried out to assess the impact of a Film on Four commercial that was being screened in cinemas, and found that awareness of Film on Four was lowest among 16-24 year olds, a fact which, according to the Channel, 'ties in with other research which shows Channel 4's reputation for filmmaking is not as strong as it used to be. Hopefully the combined effect of the cinema campaign, the TV trailers and the classic Film on Fours shown in 1993 will be to raise awareness.'<sup>25</sup> One need only think back to Aukin's comment about the scarcity of viewing figures upon his inauguration at the Channel in 1990 to position this report as part of an ongoing process of commercial awareness and sensibility that was taking hold at the Channel from the early 1990s.

**Figure 6.1:** Film on Four/FilmFour idents through the ages, 1982-2002



(Source: Channel 4 archives)

In considering how the Channel has shaped the identity of Film on Four from 1982 to the present day, two points stand out as being particularly significant. Firstly, how the Channel views its own impact on British cinema today, and which films the Channel considers to be 'best' or 'most influential' depends to a large extent on the position of the Channel in the marketplace and its own constructed brand identity. As well as a production outfit, Film4 is also brand, and, according to the Oldsberg SPI report, a brand that has an impact on British film (with its reputation as 'editor of choice', attracting consumers and in effect shaping consumer taste). How the Channel views its own contribution to film culture is inextricably tied up with this role. Secondly, it is important to remember that for the Channel, commerce and creativity, commercial considerations and cultural achievement are today too closely aligned to be considered as separate, never mind opposing, forces. That does not mean that Film4 aspires to be a Hollywood studio, nor does it mean that taking risks, supporting innovation and cultural significance are any less important to the Channel. In the 1980s, the relationship at the Channel between commerce and culture was far more polarised, but much has changed in response to a more fragmented marketplace, digital television, new viewing platforms and Video on Demand. The following case study will further illustrate this point, as well as investigating the importance of the DVD and VoD markets in determining the availability and popularity of Channel 4 films.

### **The importance of the market: DVD, VoD and third party distribution**

The re-release of film catalogues on DVD and VoD, depending on how well they are marketed, can serve to propel certain films into the public eye. Any discussion about

the cultural impact of film, about how films are viewed by professionals, by institutions, and by the public, is necessarily grounded in practicalities. A film may be stylistically innovative or culturally significant, but if it does not gain wide theatrical distribution and is not released and promoted in ancillary markets, it is not seen and does not become culturally relevant. However, DVD re-releases can help to re-introduce older films to new audiences, and can even lead to reappraisals of certain films. The UKFC study *Stories We Tell Ourselves* reported in its findings that:

The arrival of cable and satellite platforms, and the success of video followed by DVD, have multiplied the pathways to a film-hungry audience. The DVD re-issue market, in particular, has led to a revival of interest in works by British film directors whose cultural impact had initially been limited due to having only small releases followed by occasional television screenings.<sup>26</sup>

The popularity of older Channel 4 films to some extent depends on distribution through these platforms. In 1987, Channel 4 funded Mike Newell's *Sour Sweet*, a film which explored the experience of a Chinese family living in London. Along with Leong Po-Chih's *Ping Pong* (1986), this was one of only two Films on Four to look closely at Chinese culture in Britain in the 1980s. The film follows a married couple, Lily and Chen, as they move to the UK to realise their dream of opening a takeaway restaurant. When one considers that so few British films document the cultural experiences of minority groups struggling to reconcile their own identities with British life, it becomes clear that this film might be worthy of attention. After achieving limited impact upon release and remaining forgotten for over twenty years, *Sour Sweet* was released as part of Guerrilla Film's Forgotten Classics DVD collection in 2008. But what of *Ping Pong*?

At the Channel 4 and British Film Culture conference held at the BFI Southbank in November 2012, Felicia Chan and Andrew Willis presented a paper which focused on canonisation, and the ways in which some Channel 4 films have been offered recognition at the expense of other potentially valuable productions. They argued that although it was positive that *Sour Sweet* gained a limited DVD release, *Ping Pong* was actually the better film and engaged more effectively with Chinese culture and identity in the UK.<sup>27</sup> DVD markets can offer a second life for previously forgotten films, but why are some films released instead of other, perhaps more culturally important titles? The decisions are often commercial rather than cultural.

In the case of the Channel 4 film catalogue, the availability of DVD re-releases are subject to number of complex factors. For example, the Channel may have funded many films which are considered 'great British films', or distinctively 'Channel 4 films', but the Channel may not own the rights to these films, and therefore cannot release them as part of the Film4 DVD label. Where the Channel owns the rights to the films it has funded, it is able to make these rights available to a third party distributor. However, the cost of releasing a DVD is often very high, with the cost of releasing little-known films a potentially risky and unprofitable venture, which means that such films often fail to secure releases.<sup>28</sup> Jessica Levick, responsible for the Film4 rights catalogue, states that there is a definite impetus on the part of the Channel to release older, forgotten films, but that it is often difficult to secure the interest of third party distributors. In order to secure DVD releases, Levick's department will typically draw up a list of films to which third-party rights are available and offer these to distributors. However, distribution is limited by the

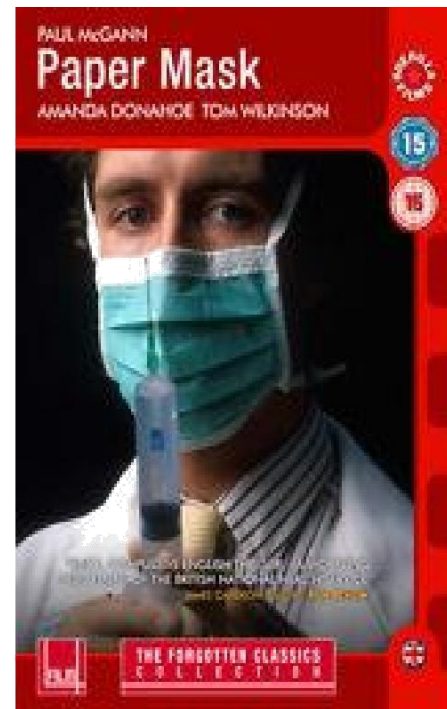


number of films those distributors can release each year, and the availability of other catalogues to choose from.<sup>29</sup>

DVD releases are also not guaranteed through 4DVD. Though the company carry some of the Channel's titles, there are many more that they cannot release in a cost-effective way. The Channel still has a responsibility to try and secure releases for films, however, so Levick will contact third party distributors, or in some cases, distributors will contact the Channel. In the case of the Forgotten Classics label, David Wilkinson of Guerrilla films contacted the Channel directly. The company selected films from the list available, and was interested particularly in those titles which had not had a release for many years. There were a few more titles that the company wanted to release, but found the clearance issues too prohibitive.<sup>30</sup> The titles chosen and released by the company were *Sour Sweet*, *The Good Father* (Mike Newell, 1985) *We Think the World of You* (Colin Gregg, 1988) and *Paper Mask* (Christopher Morahan, 1990). Forgotten Classics provides an interesting example of a third party distributor being specifically interested in older, marginalised titles, with some niche value in the market. The Guerrilla Films company profile states that:

We used to specialise in films that others term difficult, something that we are keen to continue; but in the last few years, we have worked with filmmakers at the production and post-production stages and now have some very commercial films.<sup>31</sup>

There are arguably few companies like Guerrilla, who specialise in lost or 'forgotten' films. The likelihood of forgotten films being 're-consecrated' also depends on academic re-evaluation, as in the work carried out by Chan and Willis to incorporate previously marginalised films into the Film Four canon.



*Sour Sweet* and *Paper Mask* DVD covers, released as part of the Forgotten Classics label.<sup>32</sup>

Though the DVDs were not released through 4DVD, colours similar to those used in Film4 branding were chosen for the packaging. The Channel also stipulates that the Film4 logo must be used on all films released, in order to maintain awareness of the brand.<sup>33</sup>

Though DVD has been failing as a distribution method in recent years, special edition DVD and Blu-Ray box sets have also provided some avenue for the release of older, less well-known Channel 4 titles, as Levick states:

if we can get a film distributed by Criterion in the USA, we will because [of] the way they package the DVDs - the way they create the inserts that go inside and the packaging and the artwork ... they get amazing people to do essays on the inside. ... It's like a new release model almost, where this DVD is a beautiful thing to own... almost like a coffee table book.<sup>34</sup>

Channel 4 films can often be released as part of a box set curating the films of a particular director. The department could sell their rights to a Ken Loach film to a third party distributor for their release of a collector's edition Ken Loach box set, for example. In this way, films can be packaged and distributed by director, company or

theme, and can gain a limited appeal among film fans and collectors. The release of such box sets is in itself a type of canon selection and formation.

In terms of the impetus coming from Channel 4, Levick will also often make distributors aware of older releases, linking their relevance to current successes in the industry. Levick has sought to remind distributors of Daniel Day Lewis' role in *My Beautiful Laundrette* on the back of his Oscar nomination for *Lincoln* (Stephen Spielberg, 2012), for instance, or flagged up the availability of *A Month in the Country* following Colin Firth's nomination for *The King's Speech* in 2011.<sup>35</sup> In this way, the reclamation of past Channel 4 films is partly dependent on current successes in the industry, and the popularity of contemporary productions can determine which marginalized films come into the spotlight. The contemporary popularity of older titles can thus also be dependent on publicity drummed up by current successes, although this is in turn dependent upon the efforts of the Film4 rights department in promoting these titles. To move away from DVD, a different kind of re-evaluation has also been taking place online, through Video on Demand (VoD).

#### *Film4's 30 films for 30p promotion*

In November 2012, Film4oD ran a promotion titled '30 films for 30p' in order to celebrate the 30th anniversary of the Channel. Throughout November, a different Channel 4 film was available each day on the Film4oD website for 30p. The site stated in its promotional material:

Film4 is celebrating its 30th anniversary by giving you the chance to watch 30 of its most iconic films from the past 30 years for just 30p per film. From the 1st November a different film from Film4's back catalogue will be available to rent for 30p each day from Film4oD, so you can rediscover great films you know, and

discover great films you don't. The 30 films showcase some of the very best in British film making from the past 30 years.<sup>36</sup>

Film4 is important to the Channel's own brand identity. Therefore, one would expect that film selections for this promotion would, to some extent, reflect how the Channel wants to be seen in terms of its perceived impact on British cinema. Of course, it is very important to remember that the Channel could only select those films for Film4oD that they had rights to screen. Film4oD is also hosted by FilmFlex, a third party distributor. Film4 do not have a complete choice over the Channel 4 titles hosted on Film4oD, and Filmflex will choose those titles which it considers to be profitable due to the cost involved in obtaining VoD rights and hosting the films on the site.<sup>37</sup>



Screengrab from the '30 films for 30p' promotional trailer.<sup>38</sup>

So how then did Film4 persuade Filmflex to run the promotion? The goal was to create awareness for the 30th anniversary, with money spent on marketing the promotion online and advertisements run on the Film4 channel. This had the effect of promoting recognition for the anniversary and generating free advertising for the 4oD site, and in turn persuading more people to visit Filmflex. Furthermore, if a viewer happened to forget about the 30p promotion for a film on a specific day, it was thought that they may pay the full price to watch it later in the month.<sup>39</sup> The film selections were predominantly made by Sue Bruce-Smith of Film4 and to a large extent depended on rights availability and negotiations with Filmflex. Bearing this in mind, it is possible to draw some conclusions regarding the films chosen for the promotion. For example, the list of films clearly shows more of a contemporary focus, with the majority of films being releases from the 2000s:

1980s: 3

1990s: 8

2000s: 21

Favoured directors include Ken Loach, Danny Boyle and Mike Leigh. Some of the films chosen do appear regularly on the 'best films' lists, but many more do not. The list shows Film4's own contemporary focus. The films chosen also reflect the importance of particular directors and styles to the Channel's reputation for 'discerning, non-mainstream, alternative taste' as outlined in the Oldsberg SPI report. Aside from the inclusion of directors like Ken Loach and Mike Leigh, established British filmmakers from the 1980s and 90s are absent from the list, as are the popular heritage films associated with Film4 such as *Howard's End* and *A Room With A View*. Instead, contemporary filmmakers like Steve McQueen, Richard

Ayoade and Ben Wheatley arguably appeal to a predominantly young audience with educated and discerning interests in independent, non-mainstream cinema. The list also takes into account Film4's particular remit for supporting new as well as established talent, and includes many films by debut directors and multiple films by Danny Boyle, Mike Leigh and Ken Loach. In terms of directors, the films chosen are skewed in favour of the established *auteurs* most associated with the Channel.

**Table 6.3:** Titles in Film4's 30 films for 30p promotion

<b>Title</b>	<b>Date available</b>
<i>My Beautiful Laundrette</i> (Stephen Frears, 1985)	1st November
<i>Slumdog Millionaire</i> (Danny Boyle, 2008)	2nd November
<i>Nowhere Boy</i> (Sam Taylor-Wood, 2009)	3rd November
<i>Four Lions</i> (Chris Morris, 2010)	4th November
<i>Raining Stones</i> (Ken Loach, 1993)	5th November
<i>Genova</i> (Michael Winterbottom, 2008)	6th November
<i>The Last King Of Scotland</i> (Kevin Macdonald, 2006)	7th November
<i>Me And You And Everyone We Know</i> (Miranda July, 2005)	8th November
<i>Hunger</i> (Steve McQueen, 2008)	9th November
<i>East Is East</i> (Damien O'Donnell, 1999)	10th November
<i>Career Girls</i> (Mike Leigh, 1997)	11th November
<i>Looking For Eric</i> (Ken Loach, 2009)	12th November
<i>Garage</i> (Lenny Abrahamson, 2007)	13th November
<i>Local Hero</i> (Bill Forsyth, 1983)	14th November

<i>Happy-Go-Lucky</i> (Mike Leigh, 2008)	15th November
<i>127 Hours</i> (Danny Boyle, 2011)	16th November
<i>This Is England</i> (Shane Meadows, 2006)	17th November
<i>The Motorcycle Diaries</i> (Walter Salles, 2004)	18th November
<i>The Future Is Unwritten - Joe Strummer</i> (Julien Temple, 2007)	19th November
<i>Secrets &amp; Lies</i> (Mike Leigh, 1996)	20th November
<i>Brick Lane</i> (Sarah Gavron, 2007)	21th November
<i>Kill List</i> (Ben Wheatley, 2011)	22nd November
<i>Attack the Block</i> (Joe Cornish, 2011)	23rd November
<i>Submarine</i> (Richard Ayoade, 2011)	24th November
<i>Sexy Beast</i> (Jonathan Glazer, 2000)	25th November
<i>Brassed Off</i> (Mark Herman, 1996)	26th November
<i>Rita, Sue and Bob Too</i> (Alan Clarke, 1987)	27th November
<i>Dead Man's Shoes</i> (Shane Meadows, 2004)	28th November
<i>Tyrannosaur</i> (Paddy Considine, 2011)	29th November
<i>Trainspotting</i> (Danny Boyle, 1996)	30th November

(Source: <http://www.film4.com/film4-productions/30-films-for-30p>)

In conclusion, the popularity of older Channel 4 funded films to some extent depends on availability through distribution platforms like DVD, Blu-ray and Video on Demand. However, in spite of any cultural impetus on the part of the Channel, DVD and VoD distribution depends upon a number of factors, namely; commercial

viability (profit must outweigh the cost of release, which is often unlikely for 'forgotten' films), publicity (the efforts of the Film4 department in promoting the availability of film titles and garnering the attention of third party distributors) and rights issues (the Channel may simply not own the rights to a production, even if it is widely considered a 'Channel 4 film'). However, what is clear from Levick's comments is that the Channel is in fact involved in ongoing efforts to secure releases for older, canonically marginalised Channel 4 films through contact with third party distributors and negotiations with the Film4oD host Filmflex. But what has also become clear from this study is that the ways in which Film4 constructs its own history depends on its perceived identity. The '30 films for 30p' promotion had a far more contemporary focus, was geared to appeal to a younger, film-orientated audience and was arguably less about celebrating thirty years of Channel 4 than it was about achieving publicity for the brand. Bearing the issues inherent in the selection process in mind, the promotion drew attention to the Channel's involvement as a key current player in the British film industry, and the film selections signified the Channel's support for directors at the forefront of British filmmaking. The promotion indicated the Channel's role as a producer involved in risky, innovative, alternative and above all *contemporary* filmmaking - a role in which the Channel's history is perhaps important, but far less relevant today than it was on the occasion of the Channel's tenth anniversary in 1993.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has shown the processes whereby certain Film on Four productions have come to be regarded as culturally significant and the 'best of' the Channel 4 film catalogue, through critical appraisals, consecration by cultural institutions, box office popularity, industry recognition and the Channel's own promotional



activities. Each canonical list is constituted differently, by various interests (press, critics, and institutions) and each with differing motivations. Through a study of the ways in which contemporaneous consecration (the popularity and critical acclaim of a production following its release, measurable through industry awards, festival accolades and box office receipts) can influence canon formation, it is possible to note certain trends in terms of the types of productions which commonly appear in 'best of' lists, with those films which were popular upon their initial release better able to 'stand the test of time'. Press and critical canonisation (articles published around Channel 4's major anniversaries, as well as 'top film' lists) can offer a snapshot of which Channel 4 productions are commonly referred to in popular discourse, perhaps at the expense of other, less well-known titles. These processes of canonisation do not exist separately, and are influenced by a number of complex factors (for example, many titles listed in polls carried out by newspapers and film magazines also appear in BFI 'best film' lists).

Channel 4 is also responsible for building the identity of the Film4 canon, particularly in regard to its own milestone anniversary seasons. Interestingly, Channel 4's foregrounding of specific film titles in these seasons correlates with 'top film' lists, but only to a point. With its highly contemporary focus, it can be argued that the '30 films for 30p promotion' was used as a vehicle for promoting Film4 in order to appeal to predominantly young, cine-literate audiences rather than a means of exploring Channel 4's historical contribution British cinema. Finally, this chapter has explored the ways in which forgotten films can achieve reappraisal through DVD and VoD releases. Marginalised film titles can find outlets through third-party distribution (though this is highly dependent on commercial rather than cultural interests) and can even achieve recognition based on current trends in the film

industry. Although most commentators would agree that Channel 4's films have made a significant impact on British film culture, these findings illustrate that the canon is far from 'established'. Indeed, in many small and surprising ways, it is also constantly in flux.

## Conclusion

This thesis has looked at the role of Channel 4 as a producer and distributor of feature films between 1982 and 1998. In this period the Channel funded over 300 productions, providing significant support for the British film industry, acting as a consistent port of funding for producers at times when the British film industry was in decline, and changing the ways in which films were funded and sold in the UK and abroad. The effect of these funding practices on British film culture has been profound. Channel 4 has funded films that have become synonymous with popular British cinema, as evidenced by academic appraisal and popular appeal – films like *Howard's End*, *The Crying Game*, *Four Weddings and a Funeral*, *Secrets and Lies*, and *Trainspotting*. As we have seen in the cultural impact studies discussed in Chapter 6, many of these films have also had a real, significant and lasting impact on people's lives.

For these reasons, it is particularly surprising that there has been no comprehensive study of Channel 4, its impact on the British film industry and its history as an institution. One of the many original contributions of this thesis is to write that narrative and engage with that history, and in doing so advance the historiography of British television and film. This thesis has engaged with Channel 4's policy towards film, its involvement in independent production in the UK, its long track record for supporting new talent and the ways in which the Channel has raised the profile of British film internationally, forging links with European and American producers and distributors. Through these areas, this thesis has examined the impact of Channel 4 films on the British film industry in order to redress this scholarly imbalance.

However, this thesis has gone further than simply advancing a historical narrative. This research also adds to conceptual understandings of the relationship between film and television, examining the industrial convergence between two media and discussing the consequences of this convergence on the development of the cultural industries in Britain. By focusing in detail on working practices in the television and film industries and how these have changed over time due to the involvement of Channel 4, this thesis also answers important questions about the nature of creativity, commercialism and cultural policy in television and film. This is particularly important, as it enables us to engage with ideas about how the Channel's interpretation of film under its original remit has altered as a result of fundamental changes in the UK's broadcasting ecology, as well as changes in the British film industry. We are now in a position to answer some of the key issues raised at the outset of this thesis about the nature and extent of Channel 4's contribution to British film culture.

### **Summation**

This thesis has broadly dealt with one question: how has the involvement of Channel 4 impacted the British film industry, and British film culture? This question was approached in six main ways. Part One dealt with the coming together of film and television in 1982 with the Channel's decision to fund feature films for television broadcast and cinema release. This section offered a chronology of Film on Four and its history and policy, laid the groundwork for issues central to parts Two and Three of this thesis, and summarised some of the key debates which arose from the Channel's involvement in the British film industry. Chapter 1 focused on Channel 4's policy towards film (or lack of policy) in terms of how productions were commissioned, and the relative freedom of David Rose and David Aukin in being

able to make creative decisions within the wider broadcasting environment of Channel 4. In this chapter the history of Film on Four is discussed through an analysis of the seasons from 1982-1998, which allows us to do a number of things. It allows us to note how the identity and output of Film on Four changed over time, and examine the extent to which Rose and Aukin made their respective marks on Film on Four, not just in terms of policy, but also in terms of thematic continuities across the films themselves.

An analysis of the Film on Four seasons in this chapter also provided an insight into the Channel's own relationship with film over time. For example, the Channel's scheduling and promotion of certain seasons at specific times (like the 'desperation' behind the 1993 'Greatest Hits' season) can provide an insight into the ways Film on Four has been subject to external factors, such as changes in broadcasting policy and changes in the industry (for example, the Channel's transition toward selling its own advertising in 1993). Indeed, this chapter explored how effectively the different phases of film production at the Channel corresponded to changes in the broadcasting landscape, and in the film industry. But it also went beyond the narrative account, setting up complex debates about industrial relations, creativity and commercial imperatives which are explored further throughout this thesis.

Chapter 2 was dedicated to looking at how policy, institutional frameworks and creative agency influenced the distinct aesthetic identity and style of Films on Four. This chapter also reprised some important debates and assumptions about Channel 4's involvement in British cinema. Many early Films on Four were widely seen as being 'hybrids', somewhere between films and single plays, which gave rise to much discussion about the similarities and differences between cinema and

television; what makes a film for ‘cinema’, as opposed to a television film? As this is a considerably large issue, the idea was not to answer this question definitively, but instead to provide some background to an issue which has defined views of Film on Four since 1982.

This chapter also identified a feature of many early Films on Four; namely, films set in regional locations and which drew strength from, as David Rose states, a firm ‘sense of time and place’. This chapter argued that this aesthetic tendency in early Film on Four productions was heavily influenced by the commissioning practices of David Rose and his previous experiences as Head of Regional Drama at BBC Pebble Mill from 1970-1981, as a means of illustrating the creative importance of the Commissioning Editor within Channel 4 as an institution. This stylistic trend also served to demonstrate the ways in which the style of these early films could be underpinned by industrial developments as well as the personal taste of filmmakers and Commissioning Editors. Indeed, as has been argued throughout this thesis, industrial context and the working approaches of those ‘behind the scenes’ (the producer, the Commissioning Editor) can influence themes, content and even aesthetic styles across a number of film productions.

Part Two of this thesis focused on the relationship between Channel 4 and the British film industry, and the ways in which Film on Four impacted the industry and fostered new working practices. Part Two built upon discussions in the first part of this thesis regarding Film on Four’s unusual position in the television and film industries: Film on Four was effectively operating as part of Channel 4’s Fiction/Drama Department but also as part of the British film industry, with David Rose and David Aukin working in the capacity of film producers as well as Commissioning Editors. Chapter 3 examined the ways in which the Channel’s film

sponsorship practices provided a boost to the independent sector in the 1980s and 1990s, setting out the industrial context in which Film on Four operated as well as examining relationships with independent producers. The idea in this chapter was to highlight the complexity of the film industry and to examine Channel 4's role within it as a sponsor and producer of film culture.

Through three case studies of different film companies (Palace Pictures, Working Title and Partners in Production) this chapter analysed some of the structural and industrial determinants which could cause a company like Working Title to flourish, and others (like Palace) to fail. The industrial context in both cases was extremely complex, and depended on a combination of relationships with filmmakers, continuity in acquiring finance, management skills and, in some cases, simply being in the right place at the right time. How important was Channel 4 to filmmakers, in the context of wider opportunities available? This chapter looked at the funding packages offered to producers, discussed filmmakers' experiences of working with the Channel, and drew some conclusions about the Channel's financial and cultural importance to independent production in Britain throughout this period. Chapter 3 also highlighted the fact that film is an industry in which relationships are particularly important. Contacts are essential (indeed, when forming Working Title, Tim Bevan and Sarah Radcliffe benefitted greatly from their previous links with directors during their time in music video) and good creative relationships with producers, directors and financiers more so. The relationship between Palace and Channel 4, for example, was one fraught with creative differences, misunderstanding and financial anxiety.

Chapter 4 took this further, and looked at the importance of relationships in film and television using Channel 4's remit to support new filmmaking talent as a

case study for exploring this idea. The Channel's impact on the industry in terms of supporting new filmmaking talent has been considerable, and indeed, has formed part of Film on Four's remit since 1982. The case study in this chapter of the Channel's 1994 commission of *Shallow Grave* provides an interesting insight into how Aukin and his department worked as 'mediators' between the television and film industries, and also offered a view of how Channel 4 operated in the 1990s. As this study illustrates, Film on Four was bound by the commissioning structures of Channel 4, but also operating in many ways as a film company with a yearly production 'slate' and the requisite autonomy to greenlight productions. This chapter also advanced the idea that, in the 1990s, creative autonomy and commercial constraint with regard to Film on Four were not antithetical. Indeed, this was very much a pragmatic relationship, with the desire to commission and market successful films working *with* the more cultural policy of supporting new filmmakers and financing stylistically innovative productions. The case of *Shallow Grave* highlighted the fact that producers could make creative decisions and be concerned with cultural value as much as profitability. In the case of David Aukin, this extended to protecting the creative freedom of filmmakers despite cases of reluctance from co-financiers and upper-management at the Channel.

Chapter 4 also argued that the film and television industries exist upon on a network of relationships. Stephen Woolley, Tim Bevan, David Aukin, Tessa Ross and Allon Reich have all stated that informal contacts and networks contribute to how films develop from the idea stages to production. Indeed, Commissioning Editors at the Channel more often commissioned ideas from filmmakers and film companies with whom they had pre-existing relationships rather than through formal talent-finding initiatives like the Short and Curlies. The element of chance was also



crucial, although this is something that is difficult to couch in conceptual terms and Chapter 4 suggested some ways in which we might begin to study how these chance encounters and networks of relationships work by borrowing from other disciplines. For example, Cluster Theory offers a way of studying those networks of informal relationships which spring up when companies are located in one particular area. There is no one-size-fits-all framework for dealing with these concerns, however, and Chapter 4 borrows from sociological work on television companies, work on the creative industries and the fields of business and economics in order to suggest productive ways to approach these issues.

Part Three of this thesis focused on one of Film on Four's most important achievements; the formation of transnational exchanges with Europe and the US, and the ways in which Channel 4 films have helped to define British cinema for international as well as national audiences. Chapter 5 looked at 'how films travel'; essentially, how Films on Four have been distributed, exhibited and received in Europe and the USA, focusing on the Channel's relationships with marketing companies (specifically the US company Miramax) in order to analyse the ways in which Films on Four have been packaged and sold to different audiences. It examined how certain titles underwent, in the words of Thomas Elsaesser, a 'sea change' in their journey across the Atlantic, which was highly dependent on effective marketing on the part of companies who distributed Films on Four in North America. For example, Miramax repackaged *The Crying Game* for American audiences, taking an unsuccessful low-budget British drama and selling it as a stylish noir thriller, gaining six Oscar nominations in the process. The film's reception in the UK before and after its success allows us to engage with some of the questions posed in Chapter 2 of this thesis: what makes a film for 'television' as opposed to a

film for ‘cinema’? The answer, as this chapter argues, lies partly in effective marketing and distribution – something which has always been a problem in the UK, given a lack of marketing finance for low-budget films coupled with the stranglehold of US distributors on the industry.

This chapter also looked in some detail at the Channel's relationship with Europe in terms of co-productions, distribution and exhibition. In the late 1980s co-productions between Channel 4 and European companies became more frequent, largely for financial reasons; Europe was an important source of funding at a time of recession when American companies were withdrawing from the British film industry. The festival circuit also became increasingly important as an exhibition outlet for Films on Four, and as a means of gaining cultural recognition and even distribution deals (particularly at business festivals like Cannes). This chapter looked at ‘how films travel’ on the festival circuit, gaining ‘value addition’ in the form of awards (and thus cultural consecration) and the ways that this could change perspectives of British film abroad and at home. The moderate success of Ken Loach’s *Riff Raff* at Cannes was in no small part due to Loach’s standing as an established *auteur* in Europe, but the case study of this film also highlights the problems inherent in achieving distribution for British films at home, and the ingrained prejudices among critics regarding the value of ‘television’ funded films. This case study also offered a means of examining how Channel 4 traded on cultural prestige through its successes at festivals in order to raise the profile of Film on Four and to achieve distribution outlets on the European independent art-house circuit.

Chapter 6 rounded off this thesis by thinking about the perceived cultural legacy of Film on Four. This chapter argued that the best way to examine that cultural legacy is through an assessment of the Film on Four canon. Which Films on

Four are considered to have been the most successful, and why (and by whom)?

Answering this question provided an insight into how the impact of Channel 4 on British cinema is viewed by critics, by industry professionals and academics. It also served to illustrate the role of various forces in shaping this legacy, from print media (in the form of 'best films' lists) to appraisals by cultural institutions (like the BFI) and also the role of Channel 4 itself in packaging and promoting its film seasons over time. It studied the importance of consecration in the form of awards, reviews and retrospectives in order to ascertain why certain titles have become successful while others have not.

This thesis as a whole has argued that industrial determinants are absolutely key in studying the historic influence of Channel 4 on British cinema, and Chapter 6 carries on this theme by looking at the ways in which Channel 4 films are distributed in ancillary markets. Given the sheer variety and amount of productions the Channel has funded since 1982 (over 500) relatively few have made it into the annals of British cinema history. What happened to the hundreds of 'forgotten' Films on Four, and why have some productions been prioritised over others? A study of contemporary and retrospective consecration went some way towards answering this question, while a study of how older Films on Four have been released in DVD and VoD markets offered further insight. This chapter found that older titles can be re-appraised by distributors (as well as academics), but that the release of 'forgotten films' on DVD and VoD is highly dependent on profitability, consumer demand and the needs of third-party distributors, as well as being conditioned by the types of films (and actors) that are popular in the industry today. Chapter 6 took a long, historical view of Channel 4 films from 1982 up to the present day, as a means of discussing ideas about 'cultural value' and of teasing out the complexities inherent in

the formation of Film on Four's identity and cultural legacy. It found that there is a Film on Four 'canon', but that it is far from established; indeed, the canon, as well as ideas about Channel 4's impact on British cinema, is still, in many ways, in flux.

#### **Channel 4: an assessment of historical and cultural impact**

The decision of Channel 4 to fund feature films in 1982 opened up a wider debate about the relationship between television and film. Central to this debate were conflicting ideas about the 'essential' aesthetic differences between the two media.

This thesis has not engaged with this debate (which has been well covered elsewhere) but instead investigated some of the ways that industrial continuity and creative practice can influence aesthetics. For example, this thesis looked at the way in which institutional dynamics influence creative practice: how the internal organisation of Channel 4 allowed Rose to continue working much as he had at Pebble Mill, creating a space to commission new projects from writers and directors with little outside interference, based on his personal taste for the regional, for projects which evoked a sense of 'time and place'. This can clearly be seen across a range of Film on Four productions. As well as Rose's own production practices, a cross-fertilisation of talent between Pebble Mill and Channel 4 (many Pebble Mill writers directed early Films on Four) also fed into this continuity. Similarly, David Aukin hailed from the National Theatre, where he was known for his populist tastes: marrying the artistic and innovative with popular appeal, trying to make 'quality work popular and accessible to as wide an audience as possible'. This was effectively a remit he carried over to his role as Head of Drama at the Channel, and can be seen in the broad range of productions he commissioned, and his preferences for genre films like *Shallow Grave*. This era saw also saw a similar cross-fertilisation of talent with increasing numbers of theatre directors moving into film, and Aukin

commissioned films by theatre directors like Nicholas Hytner (*The Madness of King George*) and Nancy Meckler (*Sister my Sister*). This thesis has argued that industrial determinants (in terms of the respective backgrounds of Rose and Aukin, as well as the movement of talent between various industries 1980s and 1990s) influenced commissioning policy at Channel 4, which in turn influenced the types of film the Channel funded.

One of the key concerns of this thesis has been the way that film and television intersected through Film on Four, and how working practices in both industries changed as a result. Channel 4's Drama Department was part of a broadcaster, but working with filmmakers and essentially negotiating between two industries. This did not take place in a vacuum: in the early 1980s, newly formed television companies were submitting scripts for feature films to the Channel, while film companies like Working Title were (partly for financial reasons) producing television programmes. This was a particularly interesting feature of Channel 4's decision to finance filmmaking. Interviews with filmmakers and Commissioning Editors can tell us much about the similarities and differences between these environments. As we have seen, in order to work effectively with filmmakers Film on Four had to change as a result, becoming increasingly akin to a film studio throughout the 1990s (and Aukin has also argued that the relative autonomy of Film on Four within the Channel was necessary for working in this way). As was made apparent in the early years of the Channel, a lengthy, drawn out commissioning process between various departments did not lend itself to the often frantic, haphazard way that finance for low-budget films is negotiated: the ability to make quick decisions was crucial.

This is not to say that this relationship was without real difficulties – one need only recall Stephen Woolley’s drawn out negotiations with the Channel regarding the funding of *The Crying Game*, and his entreaties to upper management at the Channel to reconsider their decision. Aukin was more ‘hands on’ than David Rose, which was not always to the liking of film producers: Woolley and Nik Powell were forced to change the ending of *The Crying Game*, while Polygram was unhappy that the Channel pushed for a delay with the filming of *Four Weddings and a Funeral*. But working with the Channel did have advantages, as Mike Leigh noted when Aukin made the decision to fund *Secrets and Lies* within a few days, following Leigh’s 18-month protracted negotiations with the BBC. The flexibility of Film on Four thus afforded Aukin and his team the ability to easily liaise with the film industry.

Ideas about creativity, cultural imperatives, commercial constraint and personal agency in broadcasting and film have also formed the basis for much of this thesis. The lack of management interference in Film on Four throughout the 1980s and 1990s offered Rose and Aukin the ability to commission films largely on the basis of personal taste, and to develop their own unofficial policies for Film on Four, as well as their own approaches to commissioning. This meant that these Rose and Aukin considerably influenced the identity and output of Film on Four throughout both of their tenures, and could even exert influence on particular productions. This thesis has argued that they were, in a sense, ‘creative Commissioning Editors’ – at times even working in a similar capacity to that of film producers. Rose was notoriously vague in his commissions, stating that ideas should be ‘fresh’ and should, as has been noted, take strength from the ‘particular’, a ‘sense of time and place’. Rose more often liked to be involved in the editing stages of a production, but

valued the 'hands off' approach he had taken at Pebble Mill, and his influence as a Commissioning Editor can be seen across the wide body of films he commissioned between 1982 and 1990. Aukin preferred a more populist approach, and tended to commission films which were more 'cinematic' in terms of their genre influences (for example, *Dust Devil*, *The Madness of King George* and *Shallow Grave*). Aukin worked more in the vein of a film producer during his time as Head of Drama/Film, which fit well with the increasingly commercial identity of Channel 4 in the 1990s. Indeed, one of his 'provisos' in his partly facetious ten-point policy charter written in 1994 was that CEs should be seen as 'not only commissioners, but as editors.'<sup>1</sup>

The arguments about personal agency and creativity explored in this thesis have naturally given rise to ideas about cultural and commercial concerns. How far did Film on Four have a 'cultural remit'? How did this relate to the Channel's wider PSB remit? What about the conflicting nature of Channel 4's remit in the more competitive environment of the 1990s? The answer is that Film on Four always had a cultural remit, although this changed depending on the personal taste of its Commissioning Editors and the wider concerns of the Channel. Channel 4's unique remit was important because as a commercial public service broadcaster it was able to provide something that no other institution or broadcaster could. For example, the BBC lacked the manoeuvrability to commission commercial productions; the BFI tended towards more artistic/cultural productions, while very few film companies in Britain had the financial infrastructure to support a yearly slate of projects, or to pursue more non-commercial filmmaking. It is for these reasons that this unique cultural imperative carved out a place for Channel 4 at the heart of the British film industry.

This thesis has also argued that creative and commercial concerns were not diametrically opposed in terms of how Film on Four operated in the 1990s. Decisions were taken with the consideration of the creative and commercial/marketing elements at the Channel. The sales department may have 'loathed' the fact that Aukin continued to fund Ken Loach (because his films were difficult to sell), but it is clear that Aukin was concerned with hits as well as cultural relevance, while Bill Stephens was concerned with the quality of the productions he was selling as well as profitability.

A particularly interesting feature arising out of the interviews conducted for this thesis was the fact the film producers could also have informal cultural strategies, and work from their own artistic tastes. To illustrate, Working Title's Sarah Radclyffe tended to work only on films, like *A World Apart*, that she believed would advance a cause, and would become emotionally invested in these productions. Stephen Woolley was obsessed with cinema from an early age, and tended to become extremely involved in his productions with director Neil Jordan. Aukin was a fan of particularly visceral, cinematic styles of filmmaking, which shows through in his commissions of *Shallow Grave* and *Trainspotting*. The above constitutes a key finding of this thesis: that the industrial context of filmmaking should not be considered as being separate from the cultural or artistic value of the finished work. Rather, the production of film *is* the production of culture. Cultural value and industrial impact can be synonymous, governed by complex competing agendas and cultural imperatives not limited to the experiences of the director, the writer and the cinematographer.

To understand these ideas about personal agency, and to understand the institutional make-up of Channel 4, it was necessary for this thesis to look in detail at



the commissioning process. In turn, this highlighted the complex ways in which the film and television industries operate, and how and why films come to be commissioned. As a result, this research has picked up on one aspect which is incredibly important to film (and to a lesser extent, television) production: the importance of networks, contacts and relationships. This was a particular feature of working in the film industry – for example, when producers and directors write anecdotal histories of their productions (as in Working Title's promotional book *Laundrettes and Lovers*), they tend to talk about the people they met through others, chance encounters and being in the 'right place at the right time'. Though there is an element of embellishment to these stories, this thesis suggests that this idea should be one of particular importance to production studies, and has also (tentatively) noted a number of ways in which academics might begin to approach this issue.

Of course, though this thesis has dealt with Channel 4 films in the UK, it has also been argued that there is a good rationale for discussing the impact of Film on Four in Europe and the US. We have seen how international distribution can change how Films on Four are received in the UK, and the case of *Riff Raff* particularly illustrated this; lauded as a successful film by an established auteur on the European festival circuit, *Riff Raff* eventually gained some critical approval and distribution in the UK after an ill-received start. *The Crying Game* was initially considered to be a small British film in the vein of a similar slew of socially conscious, realist-type British films, but it was Miramax's marketing practices which transformed this production into an international hit movie. Central to these two case studies were ideas about cultural value, the processes by which films gain prestige on the festival circuit, and how prestige can translate into actual sales and distribution. But perhaps the most important argument this chapter engaged with concerned the ways in which

critical reception can shape cultural value at home and abroad – and these case studies illustrated that while British films can be packaged in a variety of ways for different audiences, in the UK preconceptions about films funded by television still very much conditioned the critical reception of Films on Four in the 1980s and 1990s.

### **Going forward**

This thesis has also opened up avenues for further research. There are important areas that this work has not engaged with in detail, in the name of time and concision, and the fact that these questions would require approaches unsuited to the aims of this study. For example, textual analysis of Film on Four productions has taken a back seat to thinking about issues of production. As noted in the introduction to this thesis, Films on Four are often talked about in relation to their importance to British cinema, but rarely in terms of their contexts as Channel 4-funded films. This thesis has not offered detailed case studies of specific productions on terms of their artistic and aesthetic importance to British cinema, mainly because this would conflict with the aims of this work as a historical production study. Important questions to consider in greater detail might be the ways in which Channel 4 has fostered new aesthetic practices and brought new images of Britain to film and television, while further research could also involve an analysis of any stylistic trends or themes in the roughly 300 films produced between 1982 and 1998.

Chapter 6 in particular focuses on the Film on Four canon as a whole, and makes the point that there is merit to studying and appraising ‘forgotten films’ like *Sour Sweet* and *Ping Pong*, films which engaged with the marginalised subject of the Chinese experience of living in the UK. Chapters 5 and 6 have shown how lack of

critical attention is in large part dependent on industrial and financial factors (whether a film achieves distribution, marketing budget and techniques). This research could go further in taking a complete revisionist approach to Film on Four's history. For example, it might be useful to look in more detail at those films which have *not* received critical attention, but may have been visually innovative or groundbreaking, or engaged with sensitive or controversial issues. Chapter 6 noted the importance of reappraising these film titles, but for the reasons outlined above was unable to make value judgements about their merits in detail, or to develop any criteria for bringing them into the Film on Four canon.

This thesis has focused on the Channel's relationships with particular companies and producers, but studies of the work of particular directors have also been absent from this research (as, again, any stylistic analysis on this front might seem tangential or disjointed in combination with focused industrial case studies). Furthermore, because of the nature of production, it was more far more useful to focus on producers rather than directors. Directors would tend not to deal directly with the Channel, while producers would usually have greater responsibility in terms of liaising directly with commissioning teams and bringing in finance and third parties to get a film off the ground. But the Channel has supported the work of many directors, offering continued support (and the economic freedom to experiment) to directors like Mike Leigh, Ken Loach, Peter Greenaway and Derek Jarman. It might be interesting to consider the extent to which Channel 4 fostered a new generation of *auteurs* from the 1980s to the present day, given that Film on Four/FilmFour/Film4 has maintained relationships with several directors. Their bodies of work are considerable, and should be taken in the industrial context of Channel 4's film funding and policies.

There are also industrial relationships that this study has not looked at in detail, namely the Channel's relationship with other agencies such as British Screen and the BFI Production Board. A few companies have been chosen as case studies in order to illustrate the Channel's working relationships with filmmakers (Working Title as an example of an ongoing relationship, Palace as illustrative of creative communication/differences, and a few smaller companies to illustrate the involvement of the Channel in the growth of the independent sector). These case studies have worked well within the aims and context of this thesis, but there is more work to be done on the historical importance of companies like British Screen to the film industry, as well as their relationships with Channel 4.

Finally, this thesis has focused mainly on the years 1982 to 1998. Channel 4's approach to film was very different in these years from the FilmFour under Paul Webster and Film4 under Tessa Ross. More work is still needed on the FilmFour experiment, while it is also important to consider the influence of Film4 on contemporary cinema at home and abroad. This thesis has been concerned with the impact of Channel 4's film funding practices on the British film industry, and, to some extent, on British film culture, and it has shown that this impact has been significant. Throughout the 1980s and early 1990s Channel 4 was one of the only sources of funding available to independent producers. Working practices within Channel 4 and a film funding process which was largely economically protected by the Channel meant that Film on Four could take risks on projects which were deemed unprofitable and support untried filmmakers. Even those critics of Channel 4 realised how indispensable this valuable funding was, particularly at the low-budget end of the filmmaking spectrum. Over thirty years and 400 films after Jeremy Isaacs' promise to 'make, or help make, films of feature length for television here, for the

cinema abroad'<sup>2</sup> Film4 remains an integral cornerstone of the British film industry, and its value today extends far beyond simply being a producer of feature films. Film4 is a producer of British cinema culture, and the value and importance of the Film4 brand is such that it is even also able to attract finance and to import and export cultural prestige.

## Endnotes

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### Endnotes to Introduction

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